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Westfield

Javy Gwaltney
Kennesaw State University

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Westfield

College of Humanities & Social Sciences
Kennesaw State University
Kennesaw, Georgia
Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

Jary Gwaltney

Has been approved by the committee
for the capstone requirement for

the Master of Arts in Professional Writing
in the Department of English

May 2014

At the (month and year) graduation

Capstone committee:

Greg Johnson
Member

W. Todd Harper
Member

“It’s old light, and there’s not much of it. But it’s enough to see by.”

Margaret Atwood

“Freedom is what you do with what’s been done to you.”

Jean-Paul Sartre

September

Bacon ran. His long, green, punk hair fluttered behind him as he dashed down the sidewalk. To his right, police cruisers were speeding toward the center of the panic, their lights flashing red and blue at seizure-triggering speed. They barely pierced his awareness. He felt the blood rushing to his face. He wasn't thinking; instinct had taken over.

He saw people emerging from their houses, eyes squinting at the cruisers passing by and at him.

At the end of the street, he turned left. He began to slow down when he saw the yard with his mother's silver Honda Civic. Beads of sweat slid down his temples. His sneakers touched grass and then doorstep. Taking two steps inside, he collapsed onto the carpeted living room floor.

I'm alive, he thought, rubbing the side of his face along the bristled carpet.

Footsteps. He glanced upward to see Sandra, his mother, enter the room. Tears were streaming down her pale face. She dropped her phone and dashed forward.

"Why didn't you answer your cellphone?" she screamed and then repeated it in a whisper that so disturbed him that he wished she had kept yelling.

He tried to answer his mother, attempted to reconcile all his thoughts into some tangible reply, but couldn't. He wanted to talk but found that he had lost his voice. Sandra was shaking as she held him, her face pressing into his collarbone. She was trembling so hard that he was afraid she was going into convulsions.

Finally, she leaned back from Bacon's damp shoulder and took a clear look at him, then began patting him, his arms, his legs, searching.

“Are you hurt?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

He nodded.

She embraced him again.

He mumbled.

“What?”

“Water,” he said.

She quickly brought him a glass of water from the kitchen. As he gulped it down, she bombarded him with questions: Did you see who got hurt? Did you see who did it? Was there more than one?

Before Bacon could answer, the knob on the front door turned quickly and his father stepped inside. The bottom of his collared shirt poked over his waistline, his face was pale and his hair was a mess. He looked at his family and let loose something that resembled a sigh of relief.

Outside, the sirens continued to wail.

Water dripped from singed wood, the droplets falling into ash and embers to create a gray mush. Neighbors crowded the street to stare at the remains of 17 Azalea Avenue. Some had their heads bowed in prayer, as firefighters sifted through the ruins of the house.

Covered in ash and holding his knees together, Cody Bishop sat on the front porch. He had been the first one in after Pete, bulky as an ox, had slammed the ax into the front door with such force that it had lopped off the door knob. Cody knew as soon as he stepped inside that the house was beyond saving. The tiny living room was filled with black smoke. Flames had engulfed the walls, and pieces of the ceiling kept falling to the floor.

Just as he was about to give up his search, he looked past the far end of the room and saw the outline of a hand. Sidestepping smaller fires, he ran to the kitchen and found two people lying on the tiled floor.

The woman's charred corpse was still burning. Cody turned to the man and grabbed him, hoping that he had simply passed out from the smoke. Lifting the relatively thin body over his shoulder, Cody lumbered over to the back door. He tried the knob with his free hand to find that it wouldn't open. He started to turn when he heard movement outside, a deep voice saying something indiscernible, and then the familiar *chink* of the door knob being lopped off. Cody, knowing what was to come next, jumped back from the door as Pete kicked it in. Sunlight breached the threshold.

Seeing that his companion was carrying someone, Pete leapt back, calling to the other firefighters to back away as well. Cody stumbled into the yard before kneeling and laying the man out on the brown, unkempt lawn. He stepped away, dizzy from the adrenaline rush, and

turned to look at Pete, only to discover that his friend's face had gone pale. Cody looked down at the man he had saved. The other firefighters circled around the survivor. Where his nose should have been was a gory hole the size of a silver dollar. Cody lifted his hand to the sunlight, saw his bloodstained gloves and, then and there, threw up.

Now, sitting on the front porch of what had been the Hauser household, he stared across the street at the people praying. He couldn't help but feel, as he thought about the paramedics carrying away the remains of Mr. and Mrs. Hauser, that their prayers were merely empty chants.

*

Kerrigan Todd, decked out in soccer mom jeans and a blue Duke T-shirt and carrying a digital camera on a shoulder strap, rushed down her. The school was only a block away. As she ran past the oaks lining the sidewalk, she tried to reconstruct a coherent, chronological timeline from the shards of memory shattered by the morning's panic.

She had been asleep in bed with Alex when her cellphone began to ring. She semiconsciously groped around on her bedside table before finding it.

"Hello?"

"Keri!" the phone roared back at her, taking on the deep baritone voice of her boss, Richard Mudson—the Blob, as she and her co-workers liked to call him when he was out of earshot.

“Mister Mudson?” she asked in her small mousy voice, ever fearful that he had finally followed through on his threat to install security-monitoring programs on each editor’s computer and had discovered the amount of time she spent playing solitaire.

“Get up! Something’s happening down at the high school.”

“Like a sports something?”

Mudson lowered his voice. “Someone just called me and said that the police are showing up outside of the school.” She noted his pause. “They’re talking about gunshots, Keri.”

Her green eyes instantly opened wide. She was awake now.

“I need you to get some photos and find out what the hell is going on.”

Throwing back the cover, she rose from the bed and, in her purple granny panties, dashed over to the dresser. She opened the middle drawer and grabbed the first pair of folded jeans she came to.

“Did you hear me?” the Blob said.

“Yes, yes, I heard you!” she said, shutting off the phone so that she could put on her pants-

She grabbed her camera off the dresser and dashed out of the room.

Now, she could hear them, those sirens, close by. More police cars were coming. Or was it the ambulance? Perhaps the fire department? Sharp, prickly fear seized the center of her body. *What if it really is a school shooting? What if people—kids—are dying?* A picture filled her

mind: adolescents lying in pools of blood in one of the school's hallways. She saw blank eyes staring up at flickering fluorescent lighting, mouths agape in horror, limbs twisted.

Kerrigan started to cough and had to quit running. Bending, face toward the sidewalk, she took several deep breaths.

In. Out.

Blood-stained fingers twitching.

In. Out.

Bodies riddled with bullet holes. Red dripping down the lockers.

Her heart stopped racing and she stood just in time to see the line of cruisers speed past her in the direction of the school.

*

"Hold still," Bacon's father shouted as he pushed his struggling son into a kitchen chair. The young man's long, thin arms flailed uselessly in the air.

"Sandra!" Jack roared.

Bacon bit into the hand pushing against his left shoulder.

"Damn it!" Jack cried in pain. Bacon reflexively unclenched his teeth at his father's cry and let his attacker's hand go free. Seeing the purplish-red teeth marks, his father flew into a fit of rage, grabbing him by his green hair and yanking.

Bacon wailed an inhuman cry –the pain was intolerable. He expected to feel warm blood trickling down his forehead, quite certain that his father had scalped him. Jack pulled on his son's hair again, reducing his cry of pain to a choke.

“Henry, stop,” his father said.

At the edge of his vision, Bacon saw his mother enter the kitchen, her expression vacant. He began to reach out to her, but then he saw the object in her hand. Its metallic edges glinted menacingly. He understood and began to scream even louder, cursing at both of his parents.

Jack's hand closed over his son's mouth. Bacon bit into the palm, felt the flinch, but his father did not withdraw his hand. Bacon could only watch as Jack grabbed the scissors. He bit Jack's palm again, harder this time, until the man screamed and smashed his son across the face with his fist. Bacon stopped struggling.

“Jack,” his mother whispered in horror.

Jack Prospero began to lean forward to hug his son but stopped himself. Bacon sobbed quietly.

As the tile floor piled up with more and more green hair, Jack told him only that, “You can't look like *them*...this is for your own good, I promise.”

Bacon said nothing as he continued to sob.

*

Inspector Nolan scratched the tip of his nose anxiously as he looked down at the body. His eyes started at the bottom and moved slowly upward over the powerful legs, the untouched

torso, the bloodied head, and the puddle of red that had pooled onto the dirty tile floor of the school hallway. To the right, some of it was dripping down a blue school locker.

If only this were a movie, he thought. If it were, he could rewind the scene. He could watch as the puddle retreated into the boy's head like a river flowing backward out of the ocean. He could watch as the young man rose and swung his limp head forward, a soul returning to a vacant body. He could see the fragments of skull, brain, hair, and flesh congealing as the bronze-colored 9mm bullet traveled back through his head and out the left eye socket. The eye would mend itself, joining the blue iris with the cornea and the optic nerve.

But it wouldn't really change anything; he couldn't save Michael. He could only press "play" and watch as Hauser's finger pulled the trigger and the same bullet emerged from the barrel of its owner's black Beretta to impersonally shatter the 18-year-old's eye and send the insides of his head flying over an area of two feet.

To Nolan, staring down at him, the scene was obscene and he wished he could apologize for the indecency of it, and for everything that was to follow: the packaging of the body like it was a lump of beef, and the poking and prodding that the coroner would have to do later. The empty space in the socket bothered him; it was a vacuum, a pit of darkness surrounded by ruptured meat and bone. And yet within the absence was a presence, some great Nothing staring up at him, accusing him of some crime beyond his comprehension.

"Found the casing!" Roger Blaine called over his shoulder.

Nolan turned to see his partner, a squat little man with black hair and a wispy mustache, sealing up a small plastic evidence bag. He approached and took another look at the body, cringing. “Where’d the bullet go?”

Nolan tilted his head toward one of the lockers on the right side of the hall. “Number 213. Went straight on through. Phil already pried it out and bagged it.”

“Anybody told his parents yet?”

“No. Dean and Carol don’t know yet.”

“Shit. This is Dean Stanton’s kid?”

Nolan nodded.

“Think you should call h—”

“Not my job. Nor yours. Someone will tell them.”

“But —”

Blaine stopped short of finishing his protest. A knock came from behind a door next to the left aisle of lockers.

“What’s that?” Blaine asked.

The knocking came again: two raps with about a second between them.

Nolan unholstered his pistol. “What’s in that room?” he asked quietly as they approached.

“It’s the janitor’s closet, ain’t it?”

“Open the door.”

Blaine nodded. Standing just outside the frame, he reached out and gripped the handle. Nolan put both hands around his berretta and pulled back the hammer. He didn’t need to pull it back but doing so made him feel safe, stronger, like he was Clint Eastwood. His heart pounded. They told him there’d be only one gunman—the Hauser boy—and they had taken care of him. But what if they’d been wrong? What if another one was hiding in the closet with a Tek9 or a couple of pipe bombs, waiting for the right moment to emerge and kill as many as possible before blowing his brains out so he could make CNN headlines?

He gulped and nodded to Blaine. The portly man turned the knob and pulled quickly. Nolan raised the weapon and for a second kept it trained on the figure on the floor. Then he realized that he knew the young man lying there face down with blood dripping from his middle section.

“Jason?”

Nolan lowered the weapon, and the boy moaned in pain.

“Jesus, Blaine, call the ambulance back here.”

Nolan holstered the gun as Blaine waddled down the hall as fast as his frame and weight would let him.

The boy moaned again. Nolan pulled him out of the closet and into the hallway. He saw that most of the blood covered his arm, so he ripped off his own shirt sleeve and pulled up

Jason's to try to find the wound in order to apply a tourniquet to it. There was no wound. He looked elsewhere and found it in his lower back between his left hip and spinal column, still oozing.

"Shit shit shit shit."

Jason groaned even louder. His face was flushed and he was sobbing. He began to flail his arms.

"It's going to be OK. Look at me, Jason. Ambulance is going to be here in a second. You're going to be fine."

The boy continued to flail as Nolan held him down until the ambulance personnel came with their stretcher and took him away.

Nolan sat and watched as they bore him out of the school. Then he stared down at his clothes soaked with the blood that was not his own. He sat like that for several moments, transfixed by the sight, until Blaine came along and snapped him out of his trance with a tap on the shoulder.

*

Bacon dialed the number again. It rang several times and then cut to Jazz's voicemail.

He cursed, hung up, and tried for the fifth time. On the third ring, his best friend answered the phone in a tone that suggested annoyance and concern.

"Bacon, you motherfucker, you've called me six times."

He let out a sigh of relief and touched the back of his head with his free hand. Bacon shuddered; he had forgotten about his baldness.

“Bacon?”

“Yeah, I’m here, Jim. Just, uh, making sure you’re not dead.”

“Yeah, I got away. Just got home. Mama was waiting on me. We’ve been watching the news. Have you?”

“No, my parents are in the other room,” he said as he grabbed a black beanie and pulled it over the top of his head. He looked in the mirror. The hat only made him look more awkward.

“They’re watching it. I’m calling everyone to make sure they’re OK.”

“Who have you called?”

“Just you.”

“What about Puck? Did you see him on the way out?”

“No idea.”

“I’ll try to call him, then.”

“Jesus!”

“What?”

“Shit’s serious. Tons of reporters. The whole schoolyard is cameras and microphones. Ah fuck fuck fuck.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Four dead. Three injured.”

Bacon’s heart sank. He imagined young pale Puck’s face mashed up and riddled with holes, his brown hair matted with blood.

“Names?”

“Nothing.”

After a moment of silence on the line, Bacon spoke.

“I’m going to try and call Puck.”

“All right. I’ll call you later.”

*

Kerrigan pushed her way past the reporters. It had been only two hours since she woke up and already it seemed that the entirety of South Carolina’s news corps was here, snapping pictures and interviewing bystanders. She saw reporters that she knew from Anderson, from Orangeburg, and even from Columbia. She imagined more would arrive soon –news teams from Greenville and Charleston.

“Are you worried about your child?” She heard a gruff voice belonging to a reporter named Chandler from Spartanburg.

“Yes,” sobbed a middle-aged mother whom she did not recognize. “They won’t tell us anything!”

Kerrigan continued to snap shots with the Nikon, taking pictures of parents biting their forefingers in impatient dread, of police keeping them back and guarding entrances into the school, close-ups of the yellow DO NOT CROSS lines.

Chandler bustled up to her. He was a big man with a portly belly and mountain-man facial hair that hung from his neck and chin. His only feature that was not intimidating was the baby blue of his eyes.

“Hello, Kerrigan.”

“Hello, Chandler. Bullying small women, I see.”

He shrugged. “Gotta get some quotes somehow.”

“This is a mess,” she said. “A huge mess.”

“That’s kind of an understatement.”

“No, not the shooting,” she said, pointing at a female reporter talking into a microphone and facing a camera. “The broadcast reporters. The ABC woman just said there are two dead bodies, while CBS over there just said there are four.”

Chandler turned to her with a grim, almost reluctant smile. “They’re broadcasters. What did you expect?”

A siren wailed in the distance. Everyone in the crowd began to look around wildly as it grew louder, and then they all saw it: the ambulance had returned. It backed up to the entrance of the school. All the cameramen turned their attention to the door as the EMTs went inside with

a stretcher. Kerrigan could hear the relentless snapping of pictures and the almost dueling narrations of the broadcasters as they waited.

When they emerged with the still body of a teenage boy, the shrieks became even louder. Some were screaming his name, though she couldn't make it out, except that it began with a J.

"Is he alive?" Chandler asked.

"Can't tell," she said, craning to see the body before they loaded it. To her left, the ABC reporter was speaking again: "And behind me you can see the body of an unnamed deceased victim being loaded into the back of the ambulance, bringing the total of casualties up to five. I repeat: the death toll for the shooting at Westfield High School is five."

Kerrigan rolled her eyes and took more pictures.

*

Mayor Nathaniel Coolridge sat in his office with his hand in a glass bowl of peanuts. It was a stress-relieving habit to take several of the nuts in his hand and roll them about before cracking them open and consuming their innards. Today, however, he simply let his hand lie there, for there would be no comfort today.

Coolridge was 52 years old. His brown eyes would turn green when struck by sunlight, and he had cropped white hair, a clean-shaven face, and a healthy, trim body. Every work day, he wore a suit that his wife, Jessica, had assembled for him that morning. Today, she had arbitrarily but appropriately chosen for him a black tie, black jacket, black dress shirt, black socks, black shoes. Black black black.

“You look like Johnny Cash,” she had said with a smile before kissing him on the cheek. “I like it.”

He picked up a peanut and tried to crack it, but his trembling hand dropped it. He didn’t retrieve it.

He heard the phone ring again in his secretary’s office. She picked it up.

“No, he isn’t here right now...I know it’s an emergency,” she said in exasperation. “You’re not the first person who’s called. I can’t tell you where he is. No, he isn’t at the golf course. I’m sorry. Goodbye.”

The mayor settled back in his seat and stared at the blank sheet of paper before him. He had a speech to write, but not the slightest clue how to go about it. He was the heart of Westfield, a representation of the townspeople's faith in the prosperity of unity, and yet he did not know how to address them, could not imagine their pain. Yet, he had to say something, had to let them know of his sympathy, his empathy, had to reassure them that they would persevere, that they would prevail – but how?

*

The newsroom was filled with the sound of ringing. All six editors watched the television screens at the end of the room, monitoring the various reports around the state on the shooting. No names. Different stations reporting different death tolls. Various interviews conducted with anguished parents in an attempt to tug at the heartstrings of viewers. It was shoddy journalism at its best.

Ujar, the *Rosewater Chronicle*'s website manager, had spent the past hour keeping tabs on the other state papers' sections, sometimes reading them aloud to everyone in the room.

The online sections of newspapers weren't much better than the TV stations, but they didn't seem as inclined to present an estimated death toll or to ask Westfield citizens such mind-numbingly banal questions as, "How do you feel about this?"

The phones continued to ring but none of the editors answered them. Close to 10 Zack, the editor of the Sports section, became frustrated enough to unplug his desk phone; everyone else soon followed suit, though they could still hear the ringing of the secretary's phone in the hallway. Kerrigan rushed in shortly after with the camera in her hand.

"Get any good pictures?" Ujar asked.

She nodded as she sat down at her desk, the news editor's desk. Plugging her camera into her computer's USB slot, she looked up at the television screen and then turned back to the computer monitor after the pictures had finished transferring. She logged into the website manager that Ujar had taught her to use, and uploaded several of the choice pictures to the online media library. While waiting for the progress bar to slowly fill up, she perused the mini-articles that had been uploaded that day. There were two. One was about a local gardening contest and she clicked the link to the other, about a fire.

Two people killed in house fire

A house fire on Azalea Avenue resulted in the deaths of two people.

The Westfield fire department responded to a report of a fire at 8:11 AM. A neighbor stepped outside to fetch the newspaper and saw that the house was ablaze. He rushed to alert the authorities.

The building suffered extensive damage. As of yet, there is no explanation for what started the fire. The two owners of the building—Billy and Melinda Hauser—were pronounced dead at the scene.

Hauser. Kerrigan reread the name several times; it sounded familiar. She leaned to the left.

“Hey, Ujar.”

“Hmm?”

“Who wrote this piece?”

“Frank Ackleby. It isn’t much, is it?”

“What’s Ackleby’s number?”

“Uh, hold on.” Ujar turned to his computer and brought up a word document with the numbers of all the staff. He gave her the number.

“Gonna chew him out?” he asked, closing out the program.

“Sure,” she said, not really paying attention. She picked up her cellphone and dialed the number.

Ackleby answered.

“Hey Frank. It’s Kerrigan Todd. I’m calling about your house fire piece.”

“Hello, Mrs. Todd. Is there a problem with it? If it’s too short, I can always add another quote or a couple of details.”

“No, no, the piece is fine.” That was a lie, of course, but there were more important matters at hand. “I was curious—the Hausers, didn’t they have son? Won a scholarship contest about a year ago or something, I think.” The line went mum for a moment before she heard “I think you’re right. His name was Vincent or something like that, I believe.”

“Right. Was he in the house? Did the firefighters say anything?”

“No, not one thing.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, I’ve got my notepad right here if you’d like me to double check.”

“Yeah, I’d like that a lot.”

“No problem at all. Just gimme a moment.”

She heard him put the phone down and then come back a moment later.

“Yeah, they didn’t say nothing about the boy, the firefighters I mean.”

“Thanks, Frank. I really appreciate it. You have a good one.”

She hung up and started tapping her fingers on the top of her desk as she often did when she was nervous. *Why wasn’t he there? It would have been too early for him to be in class.* The rapping of her fingers grew faster, louder. She knew there were several possibilities, completely

logical explanations. Maybe he had spent the night at a friend's house, or had just decided to go to school early. But something more powerful than logic was tugging forcefully: her intuition.

She dialed another number. A familiarly gruff and weary voice answered, issuing forth a phrase with drone-like rhythm: "Westfield police station. This is Deputy Thomas Miller speaking. If you're calling about --"

"Tommy, it's Kerrigan."

His tone softened. "Hey Keri, listen I can't really talk to you right now. The phone has been ringing off the hook all day with scared-shitless parents looking for their kids, and goddamn CNN --"

She nearly leapt out of her seat. "CNN called?"

"Yeah. Wanted some information."

"Did you give it to them?"

He scoffed. "No."

"Oh, good. Well, give it to me."

A sigh. "You know I can't do that, Kerri."

She frowned, knew that she should have expected this of good ol' Tom Miller, who always managed to simultaneously disappoint and please her with his nobility. As a person, he was outstanding. As a lead, he was about as helpful as a sack of dryer lint. She would have to play dirty.

“Tommy, I know it was the Hauser boy. You might as well tell me.”

“Who told you!?” he hissed. “Which son of a bitch leaked the information?”

“Why, you just did, Tom,” she said, unable to suppress her broad grin. She shut her phone before he could say another word.

She immediately opened a new document on her computer and began typing as fast as she could. Her phone rang twice before she silenced it. Every once in a while she would glance down and see her number of missed calls rising. Halfway through the composition of the article, the secretary walked over to her.

“Tom Miller down at the police station wants to speak with you.”

“Tell him I’m not here,” she said, not bothering to turn her gaze away from the computer screen.

“I’m not going to lie to a police officer!” the secretary said.

Kerrigan turned to her and smiled in order to suppress a rising snarl. “Do you have a problem lying to yourself?”

The younger woman blinked in confusion.

“Well, do you?”

“I don’t...think so.”

“Pretend I’m not here. Then you’re not lying to a police officer.”

“But...I...um...”

Kerrigan had already returned to her work; the secretary did likewise.

*

“Of course I’m alive, you fuckwit. I didn’t even go to fucking school, man,” Puck told him over the phone. “I’ve just been chillin’ at my house, eating Raisin Bran and watching *Thundercats*.”

“You don’t know, then?”

“Know what?”

“Turn on the news.”

A minute passed before he heard Puck utter, “Jesus.”

“It’s bad, man.” Bacon was unsure of what else to say.

“Who did it?”

“Nobody knows yet.”

“I bet, man, I bet it was that psycho Tony Romero – kid’s always talking about blowing up shit, and in the computer lab he’s always watching these movies with people getting their heads shot off and dismembered and all that.”

“Uh-huh.”

“What the hell! Fox says five people are dead while NBC says three.”

“Yeah, I’m surfing the channels too. Situation’s FUBAR.”

Who do you think is dead?"

"Um...."

"I bet it's a bunch of fat kids. That's how I would have survived if I had been there this morning. I would have pushed some fatties out of the way so they'd end up as targets, not me."

"I'm pretty sure that's illegal, man."

"Fuck it, dude. No it ain't. You do the same thing in the wild with a bear chasing after you, nobody's going to throw you in jail -- you're just trying to survive. Same principle here."

"Right."

"Wait, Bacon, man, were you there?"

"Where?"

"At the school, this morning."

"Yeah, yeah, I was."

"Did you see anything?"

"No, just heard some stuff. Ran off."

"What kind of stuff? Screams? Explosions?"

"Nah. Just a couple of loud bangs."

"Turn to Fox! Turn to Fox! They're wheeling Jason McCarthy out on a stretcher."

*

There had been little hope for Patrick Wheeler. The first bullet had blown off his pinky and shattered his clavicle. The second took off the top of his ring finger and pierced his heart, clipping the right pulmonary artery. He died in the ambulance less than five minutes from the hospital, though it was unlikely the doctors could have saved him anyway.

The surgeon attempted to inform Joanie Wheeler of her son's death the moment she arrived. He took her into the room designated for this purpose, away from the others in the waiting room, sat her down on an almost comfortable couch, and broke the news to her. This particular surgeon was quite experienced at handling his deceased patients' family members: he had coldly and concisely told mothers when their sons and husbands had died of gunshot wounds or drug overdoses, had explained to husbands exactly what happened when cars smashed into their wives' faces, sending skull fragments into the brain. He had lent his shoulder for their tears and had handed out the grief-counseling pamphlets hundreds of times throughout his 12-year stint at Westfield County Hospital.

But this case was undoubtedly the worse. As he looked on Mrs. Wheeler, he felt as though he would rather slice his neck with a scalpel than do what needed to be done. She was a tiny, frail woman with pale skin that seemed almost translucent. Her veins bulged in her arms because of the thin skin; her cheeks were hollow, drawing attention to the bloodshot eyes that stared out at the surgeon, seemingly pleading to him to tell her anything except the truth.

The sorrows of Joanie Wheeler were known throughout Westfield, and he feared that what he was about to say would sign her death warrant. He opened his mouth several times but no words came out.

She saved him the trouble.

“He’s dead isn’t he, doctor?”

“Yes, Mrs. Wheeler.”

Her mouth twitched.

“Did he suffer?”

“Not for long” was his automatic reply. No sugarcoating.

They sat there in the quiet of the white, sterilized room. He stretched his hand toward hers but stopped short, leaving it there in midair as sort of an offer to make a connection. She made no sign that she took notice of the hand before her. She stood.

“Thank you, doctor,” she said.

His hand moved automatically to the pamphlet in his pocket; he pulled it out slowly. Her eyes moved back and forth across the pamphlet with lethargic sadness.

“This is....”

“I know what it is,” she interrupted sadly. “I think we both know it isn’t the first time I’ve seen one of those. I won’t be having any need for it. Thank you, though. I appreciate the gesture.”

She departed, leaving the man in rueful contemplation.

Dean Stanton turned over on the ground as he emerged from his whiskey coma. The 44-year-old plumber felt the dirt on his cheek and the sun on the back of his neck. He slowly opened his eyes and saw the remains of the fire before him, the smoke drifting upward, carried by the fall breeze into the nearby forest.

He sat up and looked around. Billy Taft had run off, leaving him, Luke Jenkins, and Larry Romero to clean up the mess they had made. None of the others was awake. He considered rousing them but decided against it. His stomach was still turning over and his head was scolding him with didactic pain, but he was a stubborn man who, despite knowing his limit, continued to drink past it anyway.

Stanton laid himself on the ground once more, curling up and pressing the visor of his Bombers baseball cap over his eyes to block out the sunlight. He would sleep just a little while longer, he decided.

Before he could fall back into dreaming, he heard a motor running, then the sound of a car door opening and slamming.

“Fuckers should let me nap,” he grumbled, wiping the hangover spittle from his lips. It was when he heard the approaching footsteps that he opened his eyes, and rolled over just in time for his stomach to receive his former wife’s heeled shoe. Pain shot through his belly down to his balls.

She kicked him again and again, hollering at him: “You stupid drunk white-trash fuck! I’ve been looking for you all goddamn morning, and you’re here stewing in your goddamn drink!”

Stanton looked up over the arms he was using to block her kicks. He could see she was crying.

“Damn it, Carol!” he cried. “Stop fucking kicking me, you dumb bitch!”

She continued to yell at him and strike him, though the heel of her shoe had broken off. The other men were beginning to stir, peeking out of their alcoholic fogs to see what was going on.

“Help me, you drunk assholes!” he cried. They just sat there and watched.

Finally, Stanton became aggravated enough to do something. He grabbed Carol’s leg just as she was about to deliver another kick. He tugged hard, pulling her down so that she landed ass first. Undaunted, she continued to kick at him until he grabbed both legs and held them tight. The two glared at one another.

“What the fuck is your problem?” he yelled.

She stared at him with stony defiance that finally eroded into terrifying twitches and tears of grief.

“Dean,” she said. “Dean, Dean, Dean.” She fell over on her side and began to bawl.

“Dean!” she said again. “Oh, Mike.”

Dean froze. “What did you say?”

“Oh, Mike, Mike, Mike.”

“Carol, what the fuck are you saying?”

He let go of her legs; they fell to the ground limply. He scrambled over beside her. Carol was gone, staring at the sky, mumbling and crying softly.

“Carol, look at me.” Her eyes turned slowly up at him.

“What the fuck happened to Michael? Tell me.”

“They shot him,” she said quietly, and then her voice rose to a wail as she kept saying it louder and louder: “They shot him! They shot him till he died and hesatBennysandhesdead. Oh, fuck, Oh god, Oh shit, he’s dead.”

Stanton fell back from Carol.

“What the hell you talking about. My son ain’t dead.”

“Yes, he is,” she screeched. “I just came back from Benny’s, Dean. Why would I lie?”

“You’re lying.”

“Why would I lie!?”

“You’re fucking lying!”

Rage flowed into his body. He leapt to his feet and began grabbing empty bottles from the s night’s fireside celebration. He threw them at Luke Romero’s house, shattering them one after another, spraying the ground with shards of glass.

“He’s dead, Dean,” she sobbed.

“Stop fucking saying that,” he shouted before stomping toward the front yard, where his ancient Silverado was parked.

“Where are you going?” Carol cried from the ground. “Don’t leave me here alone...Dean...Dean!”

He got into his truck and pulled out of the driveway. He sped past the garbage dump and the shooting range. The ride to Benny’s usually would have taken ten minutes, but Stanton ran through two red lights on Main Street and got there in seven.

The parking lot of the small town’s morgue was swarming with reporters persistently trying to gain entrance but being shooed away and berated by the two policemen guarding the door.

“Come on, officer!” said one of them, a thin fellow with red square-framed glasses and gopher teeth. “Have some respect for the news, man. People got a right to know!” Several of the other reporters made sounds of affirmation.

Derrick McAllister, the larger, more muscular of the two, grunted at the man. “Why don’t you have some respect for the dead and get the hell out here, you weasel?”

“Weasel, really, is that the best you can do?”

“Shit,” said Derrick. “Terry, it’s Dean.”

The other guard stiffened. “What we gonna do?”

“We’re gonna let him in is what we’re going to do. His boy’s dead; he’s got a right to see.”

Stanton pushed through the group of reporters, nearly knocking several of them to the ground, not out of malice or contempt but instead the impersonal aggression of a man swimming against the tide. That is, except for the last reporter.

The Weasel hustled his way up to Dean as he approached the doors. “Hey, man! Help me out here, you got a quote?” he asked, flipping open his notebook and placing himself between Stanton and the door. He tried to move past the man, but he kept stepping into Stanton’s path.

“You got a kid in there?”

The punch had a reflexive, indifferent quality about it, as though its owner was squashing a gnat. Regardless, it was a hard one which – upon contact with the Weasel’s nose – produced a sickening, spluttering noise. The man dropped his notebook and fell to the ground clutching his face. The photographers went wild with the camera flashes, in the broad daylight.

“Jeeshuz,” the Weasel wheezed through the blood as Stanton walked up the doors of the morgue. Derrick opened it for him and looked down at the grizzled, dirty man with empathy and respect. The grief-stricken father’s eyes were red from crying and his face was flushed with anger.

“I’m so sorry, Dean,” he said quietly. Stanton nodded his head in an attempt to show appreciation before walking through the door.

“You just gonna let that slide by, officers? Didn’t you see it? He hit me in the face. Look at my face!”

Derrick smiled grimly: “I didn’t see anything.”

Inside, the receptionist was startled by the dirty-looking man's approach.

"Can...can I help you?"

He leaned onto the desk for support. His voice trembled. "I need to see Benny and I need to see him now."

"Dr. Warren isn't available right now."

She saw the flash of hate in his eyes and thought about the mace in her purse.

"You listen here," he started. "I'm gonna see Benny one way or another. Now, you get on that phone and you tell him that Dean Stanton is here and wants to see his fucking son right-now, you dumb bitch."

His words would have stung if her fear hadn't canceled it out. Her hand moved downward, rubbing the side of her chair, toward the purse, as she repeated, "Dr. Warren isn't available right now."

"What are you, some kind of answering machine?" His voice rose as he leaned over the desk: "You tell him I'm here, you stupid cunt. You press that button and you tell him that I'm here, otherwise I'm gonna go outside and get my Remington shotgun out of my truck and I'm gonna come back in here and blow your pretty little eyes and your goddamn brains all over the wall!"

Her hand gripped the mace can now. She was prepared to wipe the savage look out of his eyes forever if he so much as even moved to touch her.

"Dean!"

The two of them turned to see pudgy old Benjamin Warren standing there in his coroner's green garbs. Stanton became self-conscious and meekly apologized to the receptionist before following Warren into the morgue without another word.

The room was blue and gray with containers that looked like steel ovens. On the operating table was a six-foot figure draped in white, which, like Warren's garb, was stained with blood. Stanton's throat swelled and then tightened as he stared down at the outline of the face. He already recognized the pointed nose propping the sheet up; his surreal nightmare was slowly emerging into unbearable reality. The strength left his knees; his stomach turned. He felt himself starting to cry.

"Dean, you don't have to do this," Warren said quietly. "Your wife's been by; she's already ID'ed him."

"Show me."

The doctor reached down and touched the edge of the cloth but remained clutching the sheet uncertainly.

"Show me."

The sheet went up and there lay Michael Conrad Stanton with his right eye blown out. Some of the scraped out insides of the boy's head lay beside the head, chunks of gray and pink smattered with red. His lips were slightly parted so his father could see a partial view of his perfect white teeth. Dean stretched his arm and touched the shoulder. Warren made a movement to grab the hand, but decided against it.

“He’s still warm,” he said with a grief-filled chuckle.

“Dean. I’m so sorry.”

“Ain’t even cold yet.”

“Dean.”

Stanton took off his hat and wiped his sweaty forehead and the tears from his eyes with it in one hand while ripping at the back of his hair with the other.

“Jesus. Seventeen years gone. Jesus. All gone. Sucked up like they never happened. Don’t make no fucking sense,” he yelled, smashing his fist into the wall. He turned to go.

Warren watched him violently open the door and leave without saying another word. He heard him scream “no goddamn sense!” in the lobby, and when he was gone, the doctor covered the body once more.

*

Fatal shooting at Westfield High; alleged gunman identified

BY KERRIGAN TODD

ktodd@rosewaterchronicle.com

A shooting this morning at Westfield High School left at least two students dead, including the gunman, who was killed by police.

According to a source within the Westfield Police Department, the shooter was Victor Hauser, a junior at the school.

Students said the gunman walked through the school's front entrance, pulled a pistol from his backpack and began firing. About 20 minutes later, he left and entered a rear parking lot, where he died in an exchange of gunfire with police.

Details will be posted as they become available.

Kerrigan looked over the article once more before uploading to the website's main page alongside some of the choice photographs she had taken. Wiping the memory card clean, she inserted it into the camera.

"A source within the Westfield police department," Ujar said aloud. He looked up at the news editor with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah, what about it?"

"Kerri, you know that having anonymous sources is a little bit more than just being tacky," he said as he spun in his chair. "The Blob isn't going to like this."

She walked toward the door.

"That's for me to worry about. Just upload some more of the pictures that I put on the server onto the website and call me if anything happens."

"What's that mean?"

"Just...anything!"

He watched her go and then sighed. He had promised his wife that he would teach her how to make Rogan josh but it looked more likely that, thanks to some agnsty, fucked up high

schooler, he would be pulling an all-nighter with Kerrigan and the rest of the circus troupe that Westfield's news team comprised.

*

Lisa McCarthy watched over her unconscious child in his hospital bed on the second floor, room 209 A, and every now and then she would hear passing footsteps or a cart being wheeled through the hallway. Ray was somewhere in the hospital, talking to Dr. Parker and the surgeon about Jason's condition. She had already heard the first bit of it, technical gibberish about lumbar and vertabras, and hadn't understood a word. When Parker broke it down for the two of them, Ray turned white as a ghost, and of course she just lost it there in the hallway with all those people looking at her.

"Can't you do something?" she asked through her sobbing.

Parker started to say something but stopped. His eyes had turned to her husband with a pleading expression.

"Go sit with Jason, baby. I'll figure it all out."

"I, I, I..." she had stuttered.

"He needs you, Lisa. I'll be back in a few minutes." That had been an hour ago; neither he nor Parker had returned.

She skimmed her delicate fingers across the tanned flesh of his arm. She traced circles in his forearm with the tip of her index nail, not from absentmindedness but from a need to keep her body busy so that she did not burst into tears again.

“Oh, Jason,” she uttered. Blood pumped in veins beneath his skin, the blood of a rising athlete, an all-star football player, a talented marksman, and gifted student.

She gazed down at his face, which was pointed slightly to the left, nose in the direction of the flower-patterned wallpaper. He breathed in and out. In and out.

The bullet that had struck him had, in some sense, struck her as well. For a moment, she allowed resentment and rage to flood her tiny body and she wished that she could absorb him, could gather him into her arms, and take back the gift that she had given the world.

She ran her fingers through his hair and sat down. Outside in the parking lot some jackass was playing “Hotel California” at full blast. She turned to look at the analog clock on the wall.

It was a quarter to four, and the sunlight coming through the window was beginning to take on its orange late afternoon glow. Her husband and Dr. Parker had still not returned.

*

“Kerri?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m down at the school getting some more shots and quotes. About to head over to City Hall; some folks say the mayor’s about to make a speech.”

“Think he’ll say anything useful?”

“Hopefully. At worst it’ll just be your typical aide-written consolation message. Is everything all right at the office?”

“Well, remember when you told me to call you if anything happened?”

“Yes....”

“Well, anything happened. ABC and CBS are identifying the shooter as Victor Hauser. A good deal of the online sections of the state papers I’m reading are ID’ing him as well -- some of them are even linking to your article.”

“It’s only been like three or four hours.”

“Word travels faster than ever, Ker. I hope you’re right about that kid being the shooter; things will get ugly if that’s not the case.”

“I hear you. No worries, Ujar. I wouldn’t have put it up if I wasn’t sure. Has the Blob shown up yet?”

“No, nobody has seen him all day.”

“All right, well, I’m at my car now. I’ll be back to the office after the speech.”

“Long night?”

“Long night.”

“Fantastic. I’ll order pizza for us all.”

“Make sure to get th – ”

“Anchovy and Mushroom special. I know.”

“Thanks, Ujar. See you in a bit.”

Kerrigan hung up the cellphone and got in her Honda Civic. She pulled into the parking lot and onto Mathieson Avenue. After two lefts and a right, she found herself on Main Street, the arterial vessel of Westfield. City Hall looked like all the other small town City Halls. It sat smack dab in the middle of Main Street and across from Shelby Hill where the willows grew.

Cars were parked all along the sidewalk, and most of them – as Kerrigan could tell from their license plates – were from different counties. She parked at the end of line, behind a car from Greenville, and got out. It was twilight as she walked down the sidewalk toward the building, and she hoped that the conference would be taking place inside so she could have some decent light to get a print-worthy picture of the mayor during his speech.

Kerrigan’s hope dissipated as soon as she got a clear view of the City Hall steps. She made her way to the back of the crowd gathered on the sidewalk -- there were at least 40 of them, more than there had been at the school earlier. She peered over the multi-colored sea of receding hairlines, mullets, and ponytails in search of Chandler or another reporter from one of the surrounding counties she recognized. Nada.

She stuffed the digital recorder back into her pocket; from this far back she wasn’t going to be able to get a decent recording of the speech. She would just have to watch it on the Internet later and make notes. A foul-smelling, lavatorial stench drifted into her nostrils: someone had farted. Kerrigan rolled her eyes, flipped the camera on, and with neither anticipation nor excitement awaited the mayor’s speech with the rest of the reporters.

*

“Ash! Ash!”

“Sarah, honey, people keep calling with prayers. It’s gonna have to wait, whatever it is.”

“Put the phone down! Tell them to call back later. The mayor’s about to speak.”

“Just tell me what he says when I get off. These people are more important.”

*

Good evening, my fellow citizens

As many of you know, an act of unspeakable horror has been committed against this community. Lives have been taken from us, lives cut down in their youth by senseless hatred. This is no time for cruel suspense and so I will not waste your time with theatrics or eloquence, but instead shall simply tell you the names of those two we have lost: Patrick Wheeler and Michael Stanton.

These young men were of unfathomable worth to this town. They filled the halls of their schools and homes with lively laughter and enduring memories. Patrick and Michael were both star athletes who have done their parts to carry our football team to state playoffs and they were loved for their lives on and off the field.

Pain shoots through the veins of this old man’s heart when he thinks of what these boys might have accomplished if they had lived long enough. Even as I speak now, the eyes of the world are turning toward us—some of them I see here before me. I urge you: let them into your

homes. Let them see our pain. Let them see our agony, but also let us show the world our strength. Let us show them that we will overcome this tragedy through our resolve.

To the Wheelers and the Stantons, know this: Our hearts go out to you tonight. We are standing by you.

*

Joanie Wheeler turned off the television set and sat back down on her couch. The lights in the living room were off; all that could be heard was the house's air conditioner. She stared at the wall, lost. She felt confused. There was pain, yes, but it had tangled itself with unreality.

"My only son is dead," she said out loud.

The sentence had an impact but it wasn't one of sorrow— it was one of dizzying surrealism. The statement had the bite of fantasy; she said it again and again and again, wanting desperately to believe it so she could cry, could wail, rip her clothes off, gouge her eyes out, gnaw her fingers off, something.

"He is dead."

She heard movement behind her and in her peripherals she saw the kitchen lights flip on. Joanie didn't move or say anything. There were footsteps. The kitchen light being turned off. Footsteps again, and then the cup of coffee before her.

"Does it have whiskey in it?" she asked her husband as he took a seat beside her. He nodded.

“Good.” She drank it all in one gulp. After she swallowed, she waited for the warmth to flow into her belly but it didn’t come.

She turned to look at her husband. She could see the shape of his face in the darkness and could tell that he was wearing a smile of defeat. Brad always looked for the humor in any situation; this might have constituted the first time that he failed to find any.

Brad touched her back and then removed his fingers, uncertain about how to comfort her. He put his head on her shoulder and rubbed his hair against her cheek childishly; he was already tipsy.

“Joanie,” he said quietly. “Joanie, I don’t know what to do.”

“There’s nothing to be done.”

She felt the warmth of tears on her neck.

“I don’t know how to help you.”

“You can’t help me.”

“Joanie....” he whispered softly. “I can see inside you and you’re all banged up and broken, and I don’t know what to do. Tell me what to do. Jesus, just tell me what to do.”

“More whiskey.”

He sat up and looked her in the face. “Will that help?”

She shook her head, said, “No, but I want it anyway.”

He nodded and made her some more coffee.

*

The pizza was almost gone by the time Kerrigan got back, but Ujar was kind enough to save her some slices of mushroom and anchovy. Most of the office had left except for her, Ujar, Zack, the sports editor; and McKenzie, the copyeditor.

“Where are Mary and Tommy?” Kerrigan asked before picking a mushroom off her slice and devouring it.

“Blob said they could go home,” Zack said as he browsed football pictures for his section. “Said that we needed to cut two sections since the daily special we’re doing tomorrow is only going to be five pages.”

“Makes sense,” Ujar said, “no one is going to be looking at the paper tomorrow for news about the local folk band, and enough time hasn’t passed for Mary to receive an opinion that’s publishable.”

“Wait, did someone send something already?”

“Yeah, unfortunately, some pissed off geezer from Orangeburg who thinks everything would be hunky dory if teachers were allowed to carry firearms,” McKenzie said, looking up from the printout he was editing.

Kerrigan rolled her eyes and flung the crust of her first slice into the trash bin. “Because that’s the sensible answer, apparently.”

“Yeah, that wasn’t even all of it,” Zack said, turning around in his seat to look at Ujar and Kerrigan. “Mary about turned blue reading the darn thing, and she’s read everything these

crackpots have to say. But this guy was pretty nuts, talkin' bout how segregation needs to come back, and that long-haired Goth kids need to be whipped and thrown into jail."

"Nothing out of the ordinary though, I guess," she replied. "Whenever something like this happens, you have all the old nutters coming out of the woodwork."

Zack shook his head. "Nah, this was worse than that. There was pure hate in every one of those words he wrote, psychotic rambling."

"Well, hopefully it'll be last the one that gets sent our way," she said, opting to change the subject. "How many pictures do we have already, Ujar?"

"More than enough. Everyone with a digital camera and a cellphone has been sending stuff to our email address and leaving data discs out in the hallway. I've decided I'm just going to set up a photo gallery on the website and put up the first 20 that don't look absolutely terrible.

"Well, there's about 400 more on this puppy," she said, laying the camera on his desk.

"Can't you sense my joy?" he said flatly.

She blew him a playful kiss and sat back down at her desk. She plugged her headphones into her digital recorder and began to play back all the quotes she got at the school earlier, making sure to copy down the ones that were print-worthy. A little over an hour later, as she was fiddling with the buttons on the recorder, a shape moved into her peripherals, a rather large round shape. She looked up.

"Hello, Mr. Mudson," she said, taking out her earbuds.

The Blob stared down at her with beady brown eyes, his bushy brows furrowed. He was wearing a white collared shirt and brown dress pants. Noticeably missing were his black suspenders. She took particular notice of the wart on the side of his nose this evening: it appeared to have grown since last week.

“Hello, Kerri.” His voice was crisp and had a dangerous edge to it, as though he had lived in constant aggravation under enormous stress. He wasn’t smiling. “I’ve gotten several phone calls today. Do you care to guess the nature of these phone calls?”

“Well, um, I—”

“They were angry phone calls, Keri. Very angry. Police chief called me demanding to know who told my reporter the name of the Westfield High shooter. I told him I didn’t have a clue what he was talking about, and then he suggested that I take a look at the front page of our website, which led me to your article – the source of his aggravation. So, I told him that the matter would be handled appropriately and hung up the phone while he was still yelling.”

“Well, sir – ”

“I’m not finished.”

Kerrigan shut her mouth; she felt like a cartoon character, continuously shrinking under the villain’s girth and hostile gaze.

“So, I get to my office and sit down to find the little button on my phone blinking red; I pick it up. The recorded voice tells me I have 37 messages, and they all turn out to be from

various news outlets not just around the state, but around the country as well. One young man from CNN was very curious as to how we ascertained Victor Hauser's name."

"I see."

"I applaud your resourcefulness, but I would really appreciate it if, before the next time you go sticking the phrase 'a source' into a major news piece, you'll let me know ahead of time so we can discuss it."

"Yes, sir."

He smiled at her and then turned to leave the newsroom. She could barely hear his retreating footsteps over the sound of her heartbeat. She was about to take a sigh of relief when she heard Ujar's voice.

"Sir," he said, right before the Blob stepped through the door. Mudson turned his gaze on the only non-Caucasian in the room.

"Yes?"

"Just out of curiosity: If Kerrigan had asked you ahead of time about using the source, would you have let her?"

The Blob chuckled. "Well, not that it's any of your business, Mr. Patel, but ... no." He smiled. "Now, this needs to be finalized and sent to the printer before 3 a.m.; everyone who's staying to work late doesn't have to come in until 2 tomorrow. If any of you need me, I'll be in my office. Good night, everyone."

Once the sound of their boss' heavy footsteps had faded down the hallway, Ujar turned and winked at Kerrigan. She smiled and nodded, and then turned back to her computer screen. Pulling up her email, she saw that she had one flashing message in her inbox.

Hey Sweetie,

I'm sending you this because I don't want to call you. I know you're probably really busy with the shooting stuff. I called the office earlier, and Ujar let me know that you guys were probably going to have to stay up the whole night to get a special issue out. I'm cooking spaghetti tonight and will leave some in the fridge for you to have when you get home if you're hungry.

I've been watching the news today while I've been getting accounting stuff done. It's all pretty ugly business. Different channels are reporting different casualty numbers; I bet that's annoying you right now isn't it?

Anyway, I know you probably have work to do, so I'll end this message with the usual: I love you.

--Alex

Kerrigan closed the message and smiled, ever appreciative of having an understanding husband. After putting her curly hair into a ponytail, she set to work compiling the notes she had taken over the course of the day.

*

The waning summer sun cast its light on the sidewalk that Bacon walked across. The news had come early that morning that Westfield High would be closed for two weeks for “repairs and out of the respect for the dead.” Seconds after the announcement was made, the phone in the Prospero's living room rang; it was for Bacon.

“Hello?”

Jazz's voice came over the line: “Hey, we're having a movie marathon over here. All day long. Get your butt over here around 11. Bring something you wanna watch.”

“All right, see you then.”

Bacon crammed his black beanie on his head and let his mother know where he was going; she told him to be careful. He had walked quietly past his father's home office so that he didn't have to talk to him – the two hadn't spoken since the barbaric barbering incident.

The five-minute walk to Jimmy Jazz's house took him through middle-class, mostly Caucasian neighborhoods, each of which had an abundance of yelping that often would take off after Bacon and threaten to nip his heels. Tucked beneath his armpit were the DVD cases for *Miller's Crossing* and *Reservoir Dogs*.

He felt sick; the boys were going to ask about the beanie. He would have to take it off and look as the dumbstruck expressions on his friends' faces changed to vicious delight. Maybe he'd get lucky, and they'd all be too wrapped up in this shooter business to take note of his head. *Yeah right*, he thought in dismay. And what would he tell them, exactly? The truth: *My father beat me and cut off my hair*. He rubbed the yellowish bruise on his cheek, and considered what would happen if one of the boys told his parents.

He could imagine the scene with relative ease. His mother opening the door on an otherwise calm afternoon to let the police officer and the woman dressed in the three-piece suit inside.

What seems to be the problem, officer? his mother would ask.

And it would be the lady who spoke, introducing herself as a representative of the Department of Social Services. She would tell *her* his mom about receiving a phone call reporting physical abuse, and then she would ask to see him.

About that time, his father would come in to see what the ruckus was about, but before he could open his mouth, Bacon would step into the kitchen with his bald head and the bruise on his face (a bruise which was more noticeable in his imagination than in reality). The lawyer lady would cause a fuss and demand that he be taken away. The cop would come over and have him gently removed from the premises; he wouldn't put up a struggle, but he wouldn't cheer either.

His mother and father would curse and shout in outrage, but it wouldn't matter. The lawyer lady would tell them they could file an injunction or some shit like that, and he would be whisked away to a better life like Harry fucking Potter or something. *Stop it*, he as he crossed a street, *stop daydreaming, you goddamn weirdo*. No, he would lie and bear the embarrassment alone.

As always, Ripley greeted Bacon when he stepped into Jazz's yard by running up to him and rubbing his wet nose against Bacon's shin. He stooped slightly and petted the beagle before walking up the steps of the blue house and rapping on the door.

Puck answered. He looked up at Bacon and scratched his hairy chin with his index finger. Puck was more or less Bacon's build but slightly leaner, and he had a pointed bird nose that complemented his black hair and widow's peak. He often had purplish circles around his eyes, and his teeth had remained the same butter color for the entire time that Bacon had known him.

"Why the fuck you wearing a beanie, homie?"

Bacon shook his head and walked past him into the living room. It was a small, yellow rustic room that reminded Bacon of the living rooms in '70s sitcoms. The Blitzkrieg Boys— he, Jazz, and Puck—often hung out there after school, since Jazz's mother didn't get home from the DMV until 6:00, leaving them an entire three hours when they could do whatever the hell they wanted, drug-wise. And then Jazz's mom was usually cool enough just to let Bacon and Puck stay over for however long they wanted after she got home. Sometimes she would even make them all dinner. She was the kindest woman Bacon knew and he always felt bad that Jazz and Puck smoked joints in her fancy living room.

Puck sat down on the couch and started rolling a joint on the living room table. Bacon added his DVDs to the pile on the table.

"I always knew that fucker was going to blow his top one day, man," he said as he rolled. "Him and Tony Romero. Batshit crazy." He finished rolling one joint and began another.

Bacon took a seat on the couch.

"Where's Jim?"

“Shitter,” Puck replied, tilting his head in the direction of the hallway as a flushing sound erupted from within. “Here comes the fat fuck now.”

The door in the hallway opened and closed. He turned to see the last of the Blitzkrieg Boys walk into the room with an opened bag of peanut M&M’s in his left hand, humming a few bars of “Bad Leroy Brown.” He was 5’ 6" with a belly that hung off him like a kangaroo’s pouch. His messy Irish-American red hair was inadequately covered by a camo style baseball cap and he perpetually smelled of burnt weed. He often wore shirts that quoted movies or showcased album covers. Today was no exception: He sported a black T-shirt with Pink Floyd’s prism situated directly in the middle. As always, Jimmy Jazz looked as though he had walked right out of an Allman Brothers song.

He squinted at Bacon with his green eyes as he passed by him to take a sit in the loveseat.

“ ‘Bout time you got here, man.” His gaze fell on the stack of DVDs. “So what are our choices?”

Puck picked them up and turned them on their sides, eyes dancing up and down the column of spines. “Looks like it’s a ‘90s strike-back kind of day: *Miller’s Crossing*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Singles*, *Goodfellas*, *Trainspotting*, *Boogie Nights*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Rushmore*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *The Player*.”

Jazz peered over at the stack of DVDs. “Lots of good shit here ... hmm. Let’s do *Miller’s Crossing*. Ain’t seen a good Cohen Brothers in a while.”

Bacon grinned as he felt a fluttering of self-worth in his chest. They never picked any of his movies.

“*Miller’s Crossing* is it,” Puck said, taking the DVD and putting it on the other side of the table. “As for my choice, I’m gonna go with ...uh...” he clicked his tongue, “Let’s get some Tarantino love in here – *Pulp Fiction*.”

He placed the DVD aside. “Bacon, your pick.”

He peered at the stack and considered carefully. He had to choose not just for himself but also for Puck and Jazz. If he picked a dull, tedious film that bored them to tears, they wouldn’t let him forget it easily (they still made sure to remind him about the *Ben-Hur* incident from time to time) and since his movie was going to be last, he had to pick even more cautiously than usual. He considered *Miller’s Crossing* and *Pulp Fiction*. Both were about two hours long and dealt with gangsters, so he could either go with the theme and pick *Goodfellas*, or perhaps it would be wise to go with something like *Rushmore* in case his friends were tired of that particular motif by the time *Pulp Fiction*’s credits rolled.

“Sometime before I finish rolling this blunt would be nice, Bacon.”

He threw out *Goodfellas*. Then he tossed *Silence of the Lambs* too—he had seen that overrated trash too many damn times. Maybe *The Player*? No, he was the only one who liked Altman movies. Fuck it. “*Trainspotting*,” he said.

Puck tossed the last DVD in the pile. “All right, Jim, load it up when you’re ready.” He finished rolling the third joint and then stuck the first one in his mouth. He lit it up as Jazz stuck *Miller’s Crossing* in the player.

“Let me get one of those, Pucky.”

“Get your own damn blunt. You see how long it took me to roll these things?”

“Niggah, this is my house!”

Puck giggled and passed him a joint. “You want any of this, Bacon?”

“Nah.”

Puck shrugged. “Straight-edge motherfucker. More for Jimbo and me then, I guess. Your loss.” He took a puff of his joint; Jim lit up his own.

As the DVD menu for the movie appeared on the screen, Puck’s eyes fell onto Bacon’s beanie once again.

“Say, Bacon. What’s with the cap?”

“I was wondering the same thing,” Jim said. “Makes you look even goofier than usual.”

Bacon’s lip rose nervously in that I-don’t-know-how-to-respond-so-I’m-going-to-smile-and-hope-for-the-best kind of way.

“Seriously, take it off. It’s too damn hot to wear one of those things.”

“I’m fine,” he mumbled.

“You look like you’re hiding something, man.”

“Dyed your hair pink or something,” Puck scoffed. “Can’t be worse than that turd-green color you had it.”

Before Bacon could say anything, Puck's hand shot out, and he felt a breeze touch the naked skin of his head.

"Oh fuck, dude," Jazz said.

Puck's mouth dropped open.

And then they both broke out in cruel, delighted laughter.

*

Dean woke up in his dusty armchair sometime in the late afternoon with the sunlight shining through the broken window into his eyes. He sat forward, rubbed his face, and thought hard for a minute before remembering that Carol was in the back of the trailer asleep on his dirty bed beneath moth-eaten, crusty semen-stained blankets. He reached out to the living room table – which was more like a TV tray than anything else – to grab the bottle of whiskey, only to know by the lack of weight in his grip that it was empty. He got himself some tap water and drank from a Disneyworld collector's cup as he stared at the opened photo albums on the floor.

Earlier, he had been halfway to being completely blitzed when he had heard Carol's car door opening and shutting, and then peered out the window to see her walking toward his trailer in the night with those huge albums in her hands. He had let her in. She had those tears in her face; her makeup was all gone to shit, and her lower lip was quivering.

"I need you," she had said. "Right now. I know you're not good with that, but I really, really need you right now, OK?"

He had nodded. She brought them in and they sat on the floor and started going through them. First, they went through the photos before the divorce – when Michael was a toddler. There were pictures of him in a Sesame Street onesie, and then others with him naked in a bathtub, grinning at whoever was taking the picture (neither of them could remember) with the folds of cherub fat lifting on both sides of his face, and his innocent eyes alive with delight.

She started drinking too when they began going through the pictures taken during the divorce, around the time Michael was entering junior high. There were photos of him being presented scholastic awards and shaking school officials' hands. Then there was the picture of him in his JV football uniform, and that's when Dean had lost it, started bawling on the floor of his trailer, cursing God, the devil, and everything in between.

Carol had held him as he curled into a ball, his head in her lap, and she had started to kiss him on the temple delicately. And before he knew it he was kissing her back, and then they were in his tiny bedroom, on his bed, half-naked, fondling and humping and crying.

She had asked him to fuck her, and he had wanted to; he didn't know why, but God, he wanted to. But he couldn't get it up, even with her help.

"It's OK," she had said quietly. "It's all right."

They had held each other until she fell asleep, and he got up and went back to his chair to have another shot. He had fallen asleep after the second glass of whiskey.

Now, he was stooping over the photo albums. He took the one of Michael in his JV football outfit and walked in his underwear outside with it, taking a seat on the trailer steps. The air was crisp, and there was no wind. Somewhere in the trailer park a dog barked. He looked

down at the picture of his son. He thought about football games, and father and son weekends. Then he felt a bite on his ankle from a mosquito or a flea, and looked down. He watched the blood bubble expand until it was the size of a tack, and then went back inside to see if he had enough whiskey for another glass.

*

“Thank you,” said Jessica to her maid, Lusia, when she brought her the paper and cleared away the table. She put on her reading glasses.

“Nathaniel!” she called. “Nathaniel!”

She heard him in the living room: “Hmm?”

“The *Rosewater* is here.”

“How bad is it?” he asked as he stepped into the kitchen, struggling to fashion a Windsor knot in his necktie.

“The article isn’t awful at all. Well written, in fact. Talks about you a little bit.”

“Did they ravage me as they usually do?” he asked, with a measure of smugness and cynical satisfaction as he filled his mug with decaf coffee.

“It’s actually quite kind toward you. ‘The speech was well received.’ ”

Who’s the writer?”

“Kerrigan Todd.”

“Ah, yes, she’s a nice girl. She’s always fair to me whenever she writes a city legislation story, unlike some of those other jaded jackals.”

“School is closed for two weeks?”

“Yes. Carl Smith and Cooper Thomas need time to regroup and figure out what needs to be done in terms of school safety.”

“Neither of them are losing their jobs?”

“Well, not yet. They’re both good men, especially Carl. What the press fails to realize is, things like this are out of the control of the principal and the superintendent. They can’t really do anything outside of giving in to the paranoia and patting down every child for weapons to satiate some unrealistic desire for safety.” He sighed. “And yet, no one is going to take a step back and look at this from a realistic point of view. Pulses are too high to do so. They’re going to want metal detectors, they’re going to want school uniforms, security officers, and most of all they’re going to want scapegoats. People need scapegoats, and in a situation like this it’s not going to be just one— it’s going to be a good number of people.”

He took a sip of his coffee and stared out the window at Jessica’s garden of jessamines.

He turned and looked at her with his pale blue eyes. “No one is getting away from this unscathed,” he said grimly.

*

The first thing that Jason noticed when he woke up was that he was naked except for the flimsy white and blue polka dot hospital gown tied around his body. He felt the cold air of the

hospital's air-conditioning on his chest. His upper back ached, probably from lying in the same position for hours.

Jason tried to turn on his side and that's when he noticed that he couldn't feel anything below his belly button -- and not the common "pins and needles" numbness that leaves you uncomfortably tingly for a little while. No, this was different; he couldn't feel the tingling.

OK. It's OK. It's probably just some operation they did and some medicine they gave you or something....unless they're not there anymore.

His breathing became hard. He swallowed and stretched his left hand out to move the covers. What if they had to take it off like surgeons did in old war movies? What if he pulled the blanket back to find two little freaskish nubs neatly wrapped in gauze? His fingers grasped the cloth. He pulled.

The chambers of his heart filled with relief. His legs were still there whole, intact, not chopped up, not shot off, not blown up, just there. A smile came to his lips.

"Jason!"

He turned just in time to get tackle-hugged by his mother, whose tears fell like rain water dripping from rooftops into his hair and onto his shoulder. Lisa squeezed him tightly.

"I'm so sorry, baby," she said.

"You didn't do anything, Mom. I'm OK."

"No, you're not," she sobbed, her face turning red and splotchy. "I should have been there! I could have --"

“Done nothing.”

She leaned back and smiled sadly at him. Her boy, her little brave boy. She went to fetch the chair she was sitting in; she scooted it up next to his bed and took a seat.

“How long have I been in the hospital?”

“A day.”

“Well, that’s good,” he replied, chuckling more for her sake than his. “I was worried for a moment it was like one of those shows you like to watch, and I had been in a coma for all of my senior year or something dumb like that, you know?”

She snorted in spite of herself. Both of them giggled for the sake of the other, but then Jason’s expression suddenly changed.

“Who else got hurt?”

She cleared her throat and looked down for a moment and then back at him. “Michael’s ... gone, and so is Pat Wheeler. You’re the only person who got hurt real bad.”

He felt a pain in his chest like he had just had baseball pitched into him. “Oh, shit,” he uttered so quietly it was almost a whisper. “Mike and Pat are gone?”

Lisa nodded slowly.

“What about Victor? Did they catch him?”

“No, they, uh, they shot him.”

“I guess that’s a good thing,” he said anxiously. He scratched the back of his neck and looked down at the floor of his room where the soft shadows of the sunlit trees outside of his room danced.

“Where’s Dad?”

“He went out to get some McDonald's for us. He’s going to be so happy to see you’re awake. He’s probably not there yet. I can call him and ask him to bring you something if you want me to.”

“No, that’s OK. Mom, you said ‘real bad.’ What did you mean?”

She winced as though he poked her with the sharp end of a tack.

“You said I was the only one who was hurt ‘real bad.’ How bad is it?”

She bit her lip like she often did when she was nervous and started heaving again.

“Mom?”

Her cheeks flushed and the tears started flowing again.

“Mom? Talk to me.”

“I’ll go get Dr. Parker,” she choked. “He’ll explain, uh, everything to you...I’m sorry.” Without another word, she left the room. He sat upright and stared through the door’s threshold, confused, listening for her footsteps. He couldn’t hear them, and for a couple of minutes he sat there, more concerned with his parents' well-being than his own.

Ujar sighed as the phone rang.

“*Rosewater Chronicle*. Ujar speaking. ...Uh-huh...I see. Well, I’m sorry, Mrs. Jackson, there’s really nothing we can do. We’re not affiliated with them and we cannot tell them what to do. I’m sorry about the situation and I understand, but there’s really no need for that kind of language ... Mrs. Jackson?”

Click. He dropped the phone onto the receiver and went back to perusing articles on ESPN.com.

McKenzie poked his head up from the couch. “Another crazy person?”

“No. just someone else frustrated by the fact that a press van is blocking their driveway.”

“Can’t blame ‘em, I guess,” Kerrigan said.

Ujar nodded. “How’s the followup story going?”

“Nowhere. I keep going through all these quotes and the emails that Mary forwarded me. I used all the good ones up in the special issue. Everything I’ve got has either already been said or is just plain sick, like this guy from Barnwell County. Just listen to this: ‘I am writing to offer my insight on the tragedy at Westfield high school where two young adults were shot in cold blood by a young man. It is clear that this young man was an agent of Satan. I’m sure that the press will discover that he was involved with gothic activities,’— What the hell does that even mean, Gothic activities? – ‘gang violence, and was probably a homosexual.’

‘Of course Westfield, as has the rest of America, brought this tragedy upon themselves by allowing this youngster to be lead along the path of evil. Our schools do not offer adequate

protection because they are no longer Christian institutions. We have welcomed this act of despicable violence because we shun the love and protection of God and his laws. And we will continue to welcome such a tragedy as long as we allow atheism and defiant anti-social behavior to blossom in our midst.’ ”

Kerrigan unwrapped a strawberry-flavored granola bar. “That’s not even the worst email, and I’ve still got 400 of them to go through and they’re from everywhere: New York, Charleston, Dallas, some place in Wisconsin called Acklee ... ”

“Every asshole in the world has an opinion, I guess” Zack grumbled. “I just wish they didn’t all feel the need to share it.”

Ujar said, “Yeah, I bet Mary especially feels that way – where is she, anyway?”

“Oh,” Kerrigan said, “you were on the phone. She needed a break from reading and forwarded me a bunch of these emails to read while she went to go get some coffee and doughnuts for everybody.”

“Does she – ”

“Yes, she knows that your favorite is the bear claw. I told her. You can pay her when she gets back.”

Ujar smiled, displaying his clean teeth. “Good. I was starting to get hungry.”

The talking died down after this and slowly they returned to what they were doing before. Every five minutes the phone rang and Ujar answered it. Kerrigan continued to read through

more emails. McKenzie marked Zack's latest sports article up in red ink while Zack sat at his desk and played *Minesweeper*.

They heard the door open in the hallway half an hour later, but their hopes were dashed when Mudson, instead of Mary, entered. He stepped over to the front of the room, and looked down the line as he always did.

"How are we doing today, gang?"

"Fantastic," Ujar answered with an exaggerated smile. The phone rang. His expression fell away and he rolled his eyes as he answered. "*Rosewater Chronicle*. Ujar speaking."

Mudson raised an eyebrow. "Anyone mind telling me why my web manager is answering the phone?"

"Rose quit," Zack said.

"Who's Rose?"

"The secretary," McKenzie said, eyes peering over the top of Zack's article.

Mudson's eyes bulged out of their sockets. "What do you mean the secretary *quit*?"

"Well," Kerrigan began, "she came rushing in here about three hours ago in tears, shouting that she wasn't being paid \$7 an hour to be called every filthy insult imaginable. And then she apologized for yelling, and she just ... quit. Just packed up her desk and walked out."

Mudson gave a sardonic chuckle. “College kids. All of them need thicker skin. Guess I’ll have to find a new secretary. Until then, Ujar, since you don’t do anything useful when you’re not uploading things to the website, you’re taking phone calls.”

“Aye-Aye, Captain.”

“Keri, how is that front page article looking?”

“Nothing yet. Still going through emails.”

“I’m going to need you to work on that. Any quotes from the victims?”

“Uh, no.”

“Why not?”

“Well, my line of thinking was that since all the other reporters in the state are harassing them, we’d wait until the week had passed and then do a new piece with quotes.”

“Those other reporters –do you know who they are?”

She didn’t answer.

“They’re our competition, and if they’re harassing the victims of this tragedy, well, I’m going to need you to put your scruples aside for the sake of good journalism. I admire your sensitivity, but it doesn’t belong here. Get at least one quote from one of the victim’s families for that article next week, got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Right. I’m going to go see if I can scrounge up another secretary. You all know how to contact me if you need to.”

After he had gone, McKenzie said, still quietly, “What a dick.”

“No,” Kerrigan replied, “he’s right, I guess. We’re going to need those quotes.”

“Do you know any of the victims' families?” Ujar asked.

“Just Brad Wheeler.”

*

Dark-haired, brown-skinned Demetria Smith made her way across the Wheelers' lawn with the gift basket in her hand. She had been careful to park beside the yard, so as to not damage the grass. When she reached the door, she took a deep breath, and then knocked three times. She heard shuffling from within, and then the door opened.

Her heart fell. Brad Wheeler looked old, real old, as if he had aged 30 years in a single day. His flushed cheeks were pale, and his eyes were bloodshot. He had lost weight. And then, worst of all, he did something she had never seen him do before—he gave her a fake smile.

“Demetria, how, uh, how are you?”

“About as well everyone else right now.”

“Yeah, it’s, uh, uh, rough.” He looked down at the doormat as he spoke. He was at a loss, a loss for words, for connections.

“Carl and I wanted to get you something,” she said, gently extending the basket, which was filled with all sorts of food. As he took it, she noticed his hands were shaking.

“If you and Joanie need anything, let us know.”

“We will,” he said, staring at the gift basket. “Thank you for the basket.”

“Of course,” she said, going down the stairs.

“Demetria!” he called out when she was halfway across the yard.

“Yes?”

“Joanie and I, we’re not blaming Carl for any of this like some of the newspapers and news channels are. We know this isn’t his fault.”

She smiled sadly. “Thanks Brad. It’s good to hear that.”

After she drove away he went inside the house and placed the basket on the kitchen table with the other pity gifts. Returning to the living room, he found Joanie where’d he left her, lying on the couch. He sat down in the Lay-Z-Boy and watched his wife of eight years sleep.

His eyes followed the curves of her body and stopped when they reached her small thin neck. Fragile Joanie, so small. He watched her chest rise and descend with every breath. He resisted the urge to go lie with her. She deserved and needed every hour of sleep she could manage.

His cellphone vibrated in his pants pocket. On the caller ID, he saw it was from Kerrigan Todd, one of his patients. He stepped into the kitchen to take the call.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Dr. Wheeler. It’s Kerrigan Todd.” She sounded nervous.

“Yes, is something wrong?”

He heard footsteps on the tile floor and turned. Joanie was up and about, squinting and scratching her thigh as she walked into the kitchen.

“Who’s on the phone?” she asked.

“Kerrigan Todd,” he said, mouth away from the phone. Something inside Joanie sprang to life; her eyes widened in recognition of the name.

“Well, Dr. Wheeler, I know your patients are only supposed to use this in an emergency, and it is kind of an emergency – just not one of a medical nature.”

Brad’s face darkened. “I’m listening.”

“Well, as you know, I’m the news editor for the paper, and my boss is really coming down hard on me to get a quote from you, so I was wondering ...”

He gripped the phone tighter and lines of anger appeared on his face. He wanted to call her a cunt, to express his indignation at her heartlessness, but instead he simply said, “I’m sorry, Mrs. Todd, I don’t have anything I want to say, and I’m going to have to ask you to only call my cellphone if it’s an emer –”

Kerrigan was already beginning to apologize when Joanie snatched the phone out of her husband’s hand.

“Kerrigan Todd?” Joanie said as her husband watched.

“Um, yes?”

“This is Joanie Wheeler.”

“Hi, Mrs. Wheeler. I’m so sorry to bother your husband. I know I shouldn’t have called. It was stupid and senseless of me –” Joanie winced.

“It’s OK, Mrs. Todd. What do you need?”

The apologetic tone was replaced with shocked curiosity: “Pardon?”

Brad watched Joanie circle the kitchen slowly, her free hand rubbing her other arm nervously.

“I was calling for a quote.”

“A quote about what?”

“The...the situation, Mrs. Wheeler.”

“You’re talking about my son’s death? We both know what happened. We might as well call it what it is.”

“Yes, ma’am, I need a quote about the shooting.”

“Like what?”

“Um...I hate to ask something as general and stupid as this, but how are you feeling about everything?”

“To be honest, Mrs. Todd, I don’t know how I feel, no, I’m not really feeling anything. It’s as though my whole body has been filled with novocaine. I can’t really feel anything except this sort of tingling, you know? Like I’m aware that what’s going is going on, but I don’t believe it because it’s too unreal, like a dream of sorts. But that’s changing. There is a prick of truth. I’m starting to feel the reality of it all.”

There was silence.

“Will that do, Mrs. Todd?”

“Yes, yes. It’s more than enough. Thank you so much for sharing, and again I apologize for calling.”

“No, don’t be sorry. Thank you for calling. I mean that. Goodbye, Mrs. Todd.”

As she hung up, she turned around to look at her husband. He did not know whether to be frightened or overjoyed about the half smile on her face. And then came the slow steady trickle of tears.

*

“I really think you should reconsider this.”

“I do too, but I’m not going to.”

“We just got here not four months ago. The majority of them don’t even know how they feel about you yet.”

“Then they’ll know by tomorrow, won’t they?”

“Honey, listen to me, I’m just trying to tell you to do what’s practical.”

“Sarah, do you think if Noah was practical he would have built an ark big enough for all those animals or built one just big enough for him and his family? Wherever God is involved, practicality is not.”

“They don’t want to hear you talking about this, sweetie. The wounds are still fresh. They don’t want to hear you telling them how to act or live their lives. It’s too –”

“Soon? It’s never too soon or too late to hear the truth, and that’s what I’m going to give them: the word. I’m not going to tell them how to live their lives. I’m just going to give them the truth, and they can do whatever they want with it.”

“You’re real dumb sometimes, you know that?”

“I know.”

“Like really, really dumb.”

“I’m aware. Turn out the light when you’re done reading.”

“Okay, Pastor dumb-dumb.”

*

“Mom, I really don’t want to go,” Bacon said, sitting at the table. He was gnawing on the corner of a Poptart.

“Then don’t,” she replied as she cooked sausage links.

“Dad says I have to.”

“Well, I guess you have to, then.”

“Can you tell him not to make me go?”

“Why don’t you want to go?”

“I don’t want people to see my head.”

“School starts back next week, you know that right?” She served him his plate of bacon and eggs.

“I’ll wear my cap then.”

She looked at him, her eyes hovering over his bald head. It was large, his head, and she couldn’t deny that he did look quasi-freakish. She sighed. Inwardly he smiled, thinking he had her, but she disappointed him a moment later by shaking her head. “No,” she said. “Go talk it over with him if you don’t want to go.”

He groaned. “He’s just going to say – ”

“Not my problem.”

Without a word, he scarfed down his breakfast. He put his plate in the sink and then descended into the basement, where his father sat, tinkering with the computers he brought home from the IT shop he and his business partner owned in Orangeburg. Jack, already wearing his khakis and dress shirt, was sitting at his work table, screwing a cover back onto its Dell CPU.

He stopped at the bottom of the stairway. His father looked up.

“Your mother almost ready to go?”

“She is.”

“Good. I’ll be up -- ”

“Dad.”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t want to go to church.”

His father looked at him for a moment and made a clicking sound with his mouth that he did when he was frustrated.

“Well, you’re 18, so I guess you can do what you want.”

“So....”

His father went back to the laptop. “You don’t have to go.”

“Are you going to be mad?”

“No,” Jack said.

“Okay, well, uh, I’m going to stay home.”

“All right. Let your mom know I’ll be up in a second.”

“Right.” Bacon, uncertain about his father’s honesty but not really caring, ascended the stairs, his chest beating with relief and joy.

*

Alex was struggling with his tie when Kerrigan stepped out of the bathroom. She took a moment to admire her husband. He was a rather tall man with cropped black hair that was shoulder length until their wedding four years ago when, without any prompting from her or anyone else, he went to the nearest Great Clips and got a free cut by giving his hair to Locks for Love. She often made herself chuckle by imagining a small child wearing her husband's discarded hair like an oversized wig. He had a snub nose attached to a ridge that separated two ocean-blue eyes, both of which were usually filled with good humor and boyish delight.

She walked toward him and he turned to face her. His left hand was attempting to stuff the front of a white dress shirt down black dress pants that were a little too small for his waist; he had once had a solid six-pack and could wear the jeans that even most women couldn't wear, but his workout enthusiasm had died after their wedding. She used to mind but didn't anymore; he had simply traded a lean body for a puffy cuteness like the large oversized teddy bears in department stores in the weeks leading up to Christmas.

"How I do look?" she asked, showing off her cream-colored skirt, navy blue blouse and matching blue flats.

He grinned. "Like a wench, a God-fearing, sexy wench."

She punched him playfully in the shoulder when he made a grab for her butt.

"You'd best behave, Mr. Todd."

"Yes'm."

"How's that tie coming along?"

“Too loose, as always.”

“You’re such a big kid. Come here.” She grabbed it and began to tie it into a Windsor knot.

“Every Sunday. It’s a good thing your cooking makes up for this.”

“You know what I need? I need one of those tie-doer machines.”

“What?”

“You know. One of those doohickies that actually ties your tie around your neck.”

She finished tying the knot. “I don’t think those are a thing. You could just get a zip-up tie.”

“That could work too, I guess.”

She patted his backside. “Come on, we’re gonna be late.”

They made it to the church about fifteen minutes before the service was supposed to start. They were lucky this time because there was one spot left in the parking lot, so they didn’t have to parallel park with the other cars and they wouldn’t be stuck in the post-service rush. Alex peered out at the church’s sign near the parking lot: “UNITED METHODIST CHURCH. PASTOR ASHLEY POWELL. ‘WALK WITH CHRIST. HE WILL NEVER ABANDON YOU!’ ”

As they walked inside, ushers greeted them by handing them a little program for that morning. They entered the sanctuary and sat at the end of a pew near the back of the church;

neither Alex nor Kerrigan cared to be near the center of the room where the most faithful church members sat and chatted incessantly. The couple did have some members sitting on the outer rim of pews wave to them, and one of them, a portly woman whose unfortunate love of gray garments made her resemble a certain safari animal, came by and greeted them.

“Well, we haven’t seen y’all in a while,” she said with a grin as broad as the Mason-Dixon line.

Kerrigan smiled and tried to remember the woman’s name but it wouldn’t come. “Yes, it has been a while,” she replied. Nearly half a year to be exact.

The woman smiled and shook their hands. “Hope you both enjoy the service and come back soon. Maybe make it to Sunday school next time.”

They both just smiled as she lumbered away to join her family.

“Well,” Alex whispered, “that was relatively painless.”

Kerrigan rolled her eyes and went back to mindlessly scanning the pamphlet. She was reading the prayers section when the organ sounded. She looked up to see Ashley Powell walking to the podium.

Powell was of average height and had cropped blond hair. His pointed nose and square-frame glasses stuck out on an otherwise bland and uninteresting face. He gave the congregation a nervous, thin-lipped smile. If someone had asked Kerrigan, she would have said he was in his mid-30s. On the podium before him was an open hymn book.

The preacher gave a short cough. “Good morning, brothers and sisters.” He had a pleasant voice that was light but deep enough to be heard. A child briefly cried out somewhere in the sanctuary but was quickly shushed by its parents. “Will you all please turn to page 46 in your hymnals and join the choir and myself in singing to the glory of God?”

The organ sounded as the entire congregation seemingly rose at once, most of them with the page open as others flipped through until they found the hymn. Mothers held infants with one arm, and forced older children to stand with the other; teenagers fidgeted and fiddled with their hands behind their backs while some of the elderly leaned on their canes or the pew railing or whatever they could use for balance. The members of Westfield United Methodist sang in unison:

What a fellowship, what a joy divine,

Leaning on the everlasting arms;

What a blessedness, what a peace is mine,

Leaning on the everlasting arms.

Leaning, leaning,

Safe and secure from all alarms;

Leaning, leaning,

Leaning on the everlasting arms...

Some voices trembled as they sang while others weren't choppy in the least, their owners belting out the tune like operetta singers. Babies stared up wide-eyed at the sanctuary's ceiling, which was painted with scenes from the Bible: Elijah flying up to the heavens in a chariot of fire, and Moses and the burning bush, as the sound of voices and the organ continued until the last note had been struck, the last verse sung.

Everyone sat down once more. Powell peered out at the crowd. He watched as their skins and lips and noses faded away, and then their clothes, until nothing remained but floating eyeballs, accusatory eyeballs, bloodshot eyeballs, bored eyeballs, cataractic eyeballs, dull white eyeballs, eyeballs that were watching only him. He coughed and said, "Due to the nature of this sermon, I'm going to make it brief so that I can finish before all of you start to throw things at me."

Nervous laughter rippled through the room.

"Despite the insistence by some of the deacons and other individuals close to me that I should drop this sermon or at least delay it out of respect for those who died this past week, I will be giving my sermon in full. I will not act as though the events of this week did not unfold as they did, and I do not believe anyone else should either; it would be delusion to believe so. My intention is not to cheapen the tragedy of the Westfield High School shooting, nor the lives that were lost. I mean only to do the job that the Lord bestowed upon me: to bring you His word in His house on His day."

“And today I’m going to begin that process by reading you some poetry,” he said with a smile as he pulled out a well-worn hardcover book that was small enough to fit into a back pocket. He opened it to near the end and began to read:

*The quality of mercy is not strain’d,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
‘Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
His muscle shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God’s
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That, in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy.*

After uttering the second syllable of “mercy,” he snapped the book shut quickly and stared at the congregation for a couple of seconds, letting the poetry sink in, before he spoke.

“You will not find this passage anywhere in the Bible. It’s not in Leviticus, not in Genesis, not in Mark, Luke, or John. That’s because it was written by a man named William Shakespeare – a name that I assume most of you are somewhat familiar with – for his play *The Merchant of Venice*. I will not bore you with any plot summary except to say that this speech is given by a woman disguised as a lawyer trying to persuade a merchant to spare her friend’s life despite the pain that this friend has inadvertently caused the merchant. It’s a funny thing how life imitates art, 'cause I find myself right here in the same position.

“Of course, Victor Hauser was never my friend, never an acquaintance. I’d never seen the young man, much less talked to him. I do not know whether he found football or soccer more appealing, what his favorite brand of gum was, nor the kind of grades he made. I do know, however, from watching the television and from listening to you all that the memory of this young man, who most of us have never truly known, is already hated, despised.

“Do not mistake my intention. I am not here to say that Victor Hauser was a victim of society or that he should not be held accountable for his horrific actions. I am simply attempting to reiterate Shakespeare’s words: ‘in the course of justice, none of us should see salvation.’ Now what does that mean and why is this robe-wearing bozo talking about it? Well, I’m about to tell you.

“The greatest preacher I ever knew was from Alabama. He didn’t think himself a preacher, but God’s chosen can’t help but deliver his word even if they’re unaware they’re doing it. This preacher, this great man, taught me that the ways of the world are fear and love.”

He paused.

“I’ll say it again: Fear and love. You don’t need to know anything else. Don’t need to know how to kick a ball, how to swing a bat, how to read a book, how to send a text, how to change the channel, how to browse the web, the science of sunlight, of gravity, or any of that other stuff. You don’t need to know anything else except fear and love. That’s it! Fear and love.

“From love flows unity, acceptance, and eternal life. It is the way of Jesus Christ. The Book itself confirms this over and over, my friends!” he said, his voice rising as he pointed a steely finger at the Bible before him. “John 3:16! ‘By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down *our* lives for the brethren.’

“ ‘He laid his life down for us out of love.’ ” he said bitterly. “Despite the whippings, the crown of thorns, the nailing to the cross, he loved us. He weathered us at our worst and took mercy on our souls, my brothers and sisters. He didn’t need to overcome hate because hate never even entered his mind. He felt nothing but love, and he died on that piece of wood, hanging out in the sun with flakes of his skin falling off, loving us. And it is true that we can never match his perfection, but that is not an excuse not to try, for trying keeps us from falling into despair. By embracing his example, and trying to walk in his footsteps, we shall overcome fear.

“From fear come bitterness, violence, anger, despair, and hatred. Hatred exists inside all of us like a tiny parasite. This particular creature thrives because some of our greatest fears have been realized: Our children have been murdered, our privacy violated in every which way, our sense of security smashed to bits. Hatred is a response to fear, yes, but it is never a healthy one. For now, it is enough to be bitter, to blame our pain on Victor Hauser, to blame him for the death of our children. For now, that will satisfy the beast, but it will grow. Tomorrow it wants the person sitting to your left; the next day, the right; the next day, your family; and so on until your

loathing turns inward and destroys you. I can promise you that. Our tempers will become rotten, our souls riddled with the sickness of hate.

“It is a sickness that destroys the inflicted from the inside out. It causes him to lash out at his loved ones as they try to heal him, but a man infected with such a sickness can heal only himself. Yet, sadly it is an illness that is sickly sweet, addictive to the host, for he derives pleasure from feeding on it – yes, he feeds on the sickness, just as it feeds on him! It brings him vicious, deadly pleasure to indulge in his hate. He feels the adrenaline in his system whenever the fire of abhorrence fills him. Only the bravest of individuals can tell it no; only the strongest in their faith and resolve can resist and starve the monster.

“But today, my brothers and sisters, I have to tell you that is what we are tasked with. I can see it on your faces: The hate has already latched itself to each and every one of our souls, throbbing alongside every beat of our hearts, growing slowly.”

He paused to swallow and waited for the groans or gasps of outrage, but they did not come. He did not see the flickers of their expressions because he had trained himself to see only their eyeballs – it was the technique that allowed him to bypass his fear.

“There is only one way to dispel hatred, my friends, and that is through mercy and forgiveness. Forgiveness is the rope that we use to climb up out of the pit of hate and despair; forgiveness is the hammer, the nails, and the wood that a carpenter uses to rebuild a bridge; forgiveness is medicine for the illnesses of the spirit. You must forgive Victor Hauser; you must take mercy upon his soul.

“John 3:15 says, ‘Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him.’ Do not honor this young man, but do not spit upon his memory. Do not become the thing you revile.”

He looked down at the podium and then back up at the congregation once more, leaning forward. He stared at all the eyes before him with all the conviction that he could muster.

“Forgive Victor Hauser; your souls depend on it.”

Powell unbunched his shoulders and relaxed slightly. He blinked and the eyes of the congregation were back in their respective sockets. Before him were several angry visages; the lines of fury etched into their faces screamed with silent outrage. Others, however, looked satisfied, as if someone had spoken their own thoughts with a level of articulation that they couldn’t muster. The majority of the congregation just looked confused, uncertain how to feel about the sermon.

“Now, if you’ll join me for the Lord’s Prayer and the closing hymn, we’ll end the service and for once y’all will be able to beat the Baptists to lunch.”

Polite laughter as everyone flipped to Matthew in their Bibles. Powell began and everyone followed suit:

Our father in heaven,

Hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come,

Your will be done,

On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,

And forgive us

Our debts,

As we have also forgiven our debtors

And lead us not into temptation,

But deliver us from evil.

The congregation rose and sang “To God be the Glory.” Kerrigan leaned up to Alex’s ear and whispered, “Did that just really happen?” He widened his eyes and poked out his lips as though that meant something, and they went back to singing. When it was all over and done with, the couple made sure they were near the beginning of the line that was leaving the church.

Pastor Powell and his wife, Sarah, were shaking the hands of the congregation members as they left. When he shook Kerrigan’s hand, she leaned over and said, in an almost whisper, “That was a great sermon.” “Thank you,” he replied, hastening to add, “Have a good Sunday.”

In the parking lot, Kerrigan turned to Alex as he started the car.

“Where do you want to go eat?”

“Pizza Hut?”

“Works for me.”

He pulled out onto the main road.

“That took a lot of guts,” Kerrigan said at the next red light.

“Yeah, preacher man got him a pair the size of wrecking balls.”

October

Once upon a time, not long after that Great Wall had been torn down and a man stood in front of a tank in China, a soul was being crafted in the heavens by the creator of all things: he who had banished the darkness with light; he who had crafted the land and the firmament; he whose preferred method of settling disputes was through smiting. The soul in question was sculpted together with dog dung, quail gizzards, a pig’s tail, mud, and a sprinkling of genius. This creator, having decided his creation was perfect—or he just became bored with it—squashed the sculpture and rolled it until it was perfectly spherical (though it did have a little tail poking out the end), spun three times on his celestial twinkle toes and pitched it toward the earth.

When the spiritual ball broke the atmosphere, it was plummeting in the direction of New York City where the traits of this at-the-moment-celestial-tadpole-but-soon-to-be-youngster would serve him so well when they sought to fulfill the ambitions the creator had instilled in him. And, oh yes, wouldn’t you know it, this kid was going to be aces; he had everything inside him he needed to be whatever he wanted to be, and he was heading toward the true land of the opportunity, fertile soil so to speak. But there’s always a catch isn’t there? Always something that has to go wrong...like when that pesky satellite appeared out of nowhere and stuck its stupid

solar panel right in the trajectory of our little friend, the yet unnamed tadpole, just to muck everything up.

So now, instead of heading for an unclaimed body in the Big Apple, the creator's newest sphere slams into the very edge of the panel, creating an inaudible *Karrrrrang!*, sending the unlucky thing off course—a northern soul speeding for a southern body.

And that is the story of Bacon Prospero.

At least that's the way Jimmy Jazz told it to Blitzkrieg Kids (again) as they sat around in Mary Jane's den half-listening to the pop muzak blaring from the three year old speaker system. Jazz's habit of simultaneously insulting him while praising him never ceases to surprise Bacon, who sat back now on the couch, rolling his eyes, as Jazz took another puff of a joint. Bacon crossed one leg over the other to get some feeling back into it.

"I think the weed's getting' to you, Jim," Puck said. "You're telling tall tales again. Best pass that shit here before you pass out."

"Niggah, I'll pass the joint whenever I want. This shit don't affect me, can't affect me," he said, taking another puff. "You know it ain't addictive."

He passed it to Puck who finished it off.

"Man, I'm kinda glad school's starting back," Bacon said, wanting to change the subject.

There was a brief moment of silence where Jazz and Puck mulled over the remark, a moment where they gnawed on it with the teeth of their brain, testing it. Jazz piped up first: "Yeah, I'm ready to go back as well. A break is nice in the middle of the year, but not after

you've only been in for a month. I feel weird saying this, but doing nothing but smoking pot and watching movies with your friends every day for two weeks gets old."

"Heretic!"

"Shut up, Puck. You're ready to go back too and you know it."

Bacon scratched his arm to kill an itch. "Do you think...they'll have all the bullet holes fixed and stuff, or they'll just leave 'em there like a tribute or something?"

Puck scratched the back of his head. "Nah, too messed up to do something like that."

"They're making a memorial anyway," Jazz said, surprised as he often was when he heard his own voice in the presence of his friends. "They're gonna stick over the old playground on Shelby Hill."

"Really?" Bacon asked, raising his eyebrow. "Seems kinda, I dunno, kinda morbid."

"It's what my mom said they were doing. Putting it up on the highest place in town so everybody can see it."

"Fucking ridiculous," Puck scoffed. "Going to ruin a perfectly good playground for some dead people. Why not build a new playground?"

Jazz answered as he stood and walked to the kitchen: "They have to build it somewhere."

Frowning, Puck said, real quiet like, "Do they?"

Bacon got down on the floor so he could lay out and then spoke sadly, "I had a class with Michael Stanton. I didn't really know him that well, kinda thought he was a jerk but I know

they're going to have a black ribbon around his desk just like they did around Robert Moler's chair after he fell under his dad's tiller. And I'm gonna feel like a dick when I see the ribbon because I thought he was a jerk and now he's dead...."

"Him being dead doesn't mean he wasn't a jerk. Don't feel guilty because he died."

He kept on going as if he hadn't heard Puck, "Whole class is going to be depressed for a month. I sit in the aisle next to where he sat. I mean, I don't sit across from where he was; he sat to my back right."

"So?" Puck said, not rudely or anything, but like he was legitimately curious about the importance of the seating arrangement.

Bacon blinked at the ceiling and then just shrugged his shoulders, said "I don't know."

At that point, Jimmy Jazz walked back in munching on a hot-pocket. He asked if they should turn the stereo off and watch another movie, maybe *Raging Bull*. Everyone said yes, but then Jazz couldn't find the movie and no one wanted to watch anything else, so Puck and Bacon went home just as the clouds started getting dark and fat, and the afternoon sky began to drip.

*

The call for Kerrigan came through on Wednesday around lunchtime as she was opening the wrapper of another granola bar. She sighed and picked up the desktop phone.

"Hello, this is Kerrigan Todd, news editor, speaking."

The voice that answered was at once serious and whimsical, flighty but controlled:
"Haylo, Mrs. Todd. Do you remember me?"

She searched her memory: A blurry image of young woman came to mind but there was no name attached.

“Well, your voice sounds familiar but I can’t just place your name!”

“Oh, it’s Lenore Loveaux, silly!” she exclaimed undaunted.

The name didn’t help Kerrigan at all. “Lenore! I remember you!”

“I knew you would. Listen, I was calling because I was wondering if you’d be willing to do some freelance work. I’ve been reading your coverage of the shooting, great, great stuff. I mean, of course, it’s terrible—very very terrible—but your coverage is spot on!”

“Thank you, Miss Loveaux.”

“So, I was thinking about you taking a little trip to Charlotte, say maybe the weekend of the 13th, so we can discuss you doing an extended piece on the shooting for my magazine *The Other Magazine*. Of course, I would send you a check for the gas and pay for the hotel. You could even bring your hubby or beau if you have one.”

Kerrigan raised an eyebrow: the last sentence sounded false, like Loveaux was trying to draw out information by making that suggestion.

“Now, I can’t really pay you that much for the piece itself—I mean, we’re not *Rolling Stone* or anything—but we do have a pretty nice circulation: tons of clubs and cafes in Charlotte, and some other outlets in nearby towns like Fort Mill and Rock Hill. So, what do you say, Mrs. Todd, want to have a chat?”

“Sure, I’d love to,” she said before thinking about it.

“Excellent! I’ll see you that Saturday. Keep your eye on your work email: I’ll be sending your reservation information.”

“Okay, thank you, Miss Loveaux.”

“Sweetie, call me Lenore. And thank you. Buh-bye.”

Kerrigan hung up the phone. Ujar piped his head up.

“What was that about?”

“Woman named Lenore Loveaux called. She wants me to go up to Charlotte and talk to her about doing a piece concerning the shooting for her magazine.

His eyes nearly bulged out of his head. “And you said *yes*?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I?”

Zack gave a little laugh and spun around in his chair. “Kerri, do you remember Lenore?”

“No, her voice sounded familiar though”

Ujar groaned. “The Southeastern journalist conference last year...she was the one in the hotel bar downing appletinis like nobody’s business, the one who set off cherry bombs in the lobby restroom and got thrown out.”

“Oh god! That’s her?”

“Yep.”

“Oh god! Should I call back and cancel?”

“You better!” Zack cried.

“But what do I say?”

“Fake Ebola,” Ujar suggested.

“Not helpful.”

“Maybe it might not be so bad. You’re just going to go up for a talk, right? She’s paying for everything?”

“Yeah.”

“Just go up, listen to her spiel, tell her no, and then have a night on the town with Alex.”

“Yeah, I mean I didn’t agree to write the piece and a weekend trip would be nice.”

“Just make sure you tell her no. You really don’t want to work long-term with that woman.”

“Tell her no. Got it.”

The desk phone rang again; it was Dale Griffords wanting to know when the newspaper was going to run the ad for his business. She transferred him to the advertising office and took a bite of her granola bar. She swallowed the piece and chunked the rest into the garbage bin. It was a bit too chewy.

*

The moon illuminated the little pond on Hole 14 as the short but lean young man puffed yet another cigarette. With one hand, he nervously ran his pale hand over his bleached blond hair and then scratched the pinna of his pierced ear. Another puff.

The course was closed, but being a caddy had its advantages; one of them being that you knew that the code to the security door on at the West end of the course was 4-4-1. His customers, the ones he trusted or at least knew were too chickenshit to wreck anything in the golf course, knew the code as well.

He finished the cigarette and threw the butt in the pond.

“Dawg best hurry up,” he said to the trees behind him. “Moms is gonna freak if I don’t get my ass back soon.” The trees didn’t say anything back.

“ Fuck y’all too then.”

He heard the security door open and open from across the way. “ ‘Bout damn time!” he cried out to the visitor as he approached. Terry’s white teeth appeared between the folds of his nearly purple lips when he smiled, “Sorry, nigga. Brother took the car so I had to walk; you know how it goes.”

Q-Tip nodded as though he did understand how it went. “Not a problem.”

“How much you want?” Q-Tip asked, pulling out a large plastic bag filled with green and brown clumps.

“Dimebag, brother.”

He frowned. This lazy ass had made him wait an hour and a half at the golf course so that he would very probably be returning home for a beating from his mother or his stepfather or both? Fuck that noise.

“Sorry, dude. I’ve had to, uh, temporarily discontinue the dimebag. It’s a fifteen-bag, now.”

“Fifteen-bag?” Terry’s eyes widened. “For real?”

“Yeah, sorry man.”

“Q-Tip, it’s me.”

“I know brother but times is hard...you know how it is.”

“Yeah, I know ‘times is hard,’ which is why I’m real hesitant to spend fifteen dollars on ten dollars’ worth a weed. Can’t’ you give me a damn discount or some shit?”

Q-Tip scrunched up his face and squinted his eyes to give the impression that he was considering a discount, but then he shook his head: “Nope. Sorry, Terry. I give you a discount, I gotta give everybody a discount. Gotta be fair.”

Terry stared at him discontentedly for a few seconds and then dug out the fifteen dollars from his coat pocket while grumbling, “White boy talkin’ bout being fair and here he is gypping me like the white man always done to the black man. I hope you’re happy with yourself, motherfucker, perpetuatin’ the gyppin’.”

“Ah, Terry, don’t pull that shit.”

“Just gimmie my weed, man. Give it here!”

He pulled out one of the dimebags from out of his pants pocket and placed it gently in Terry’s hand. Terry pushed three fives into his hand.

“Nice doin’ the business with you, boy.”

“Wish I could say the same,” Terry said as he began to make his way back to the gate.

“Ah, don’t be like that, Terry!”

Terry flipped him off and then went out the gate. Q-Tip sighed and stuffed the five-dollar bills into his pocket. He turned back to the trees, “Ain’t nothing. He can just be a little bitch sometimes. He’ll get over it.”

He pulled out another cigarette and lit it with a disposable lighter. He puffed slowly on the cigarette, savoring it—the last one before the long trek home. Behind him, in the pond, a frog or something jumped and made a splash.

*

They moved Jason down to the bottom floor of the hospital to a room three doors down from the physical therapy room so that he didn’t have to go up and down the elevator every day for what the doctor assured him would be a necessary but grueling endeavor. They weren’t kidding. The first thing his therapist did was get him out of the wheelchair and make him traverse the room by holding on to the railing that stuck out of the wall. This reminded him of when he and his parents would drop his little cousin off at dance recital lessons and go and pick

her up. As he moved along the rail, his legs flopping uselessly below him, he imagined himself wearing a pink tu-tu, which didn't make things easier.

The moving around wasn't the hardest bit; in fact, thanks to his weight training, it was almost a breeze. The most difficult part was getting out of the wheelchair. The first two or three times he had assistance from his therapist, Dr. Peter Tristan, but then he wanted to do it by himself. He would roll close to the rail and then grab it with one hand before pulling himself close so he grab it with another and pull himself to the bar. He still had difficulty getting back in the chair and had to rely on Peter for assistance.

After that, he would perform muscle exercises, which meant that he would lie supine on a little table in the therapy room while Tristan bent Jason's legs at the knees and stretched them out in the air for several repetitions. This made him uncomfortable because he felt lazy, and he was also concerned that his feet were giving off an unpleasant aroma right next to his therapist's nose.

To finish off the session, the good doctor would make him sit up. Then he would pull out a little red hammer made from rubber and, like some crackpot doctor from a Looney Toon, he would tap each knee over and over again. Jason never felt anything and his legs didn't move. He didn't know what the doctor was doing but figured that he was the expert and it was best not to ask. After he was finished, he put the hammer away in one of his coat pockets and started making notes on a piece of paper attached to a clipboard. When they were finished, Tristan rolled him up back to his hospital bed and told him that they were making good progress but wouldn't say when Jason could expect to be released. He was growing anxious about this issue: school

started back in a week. They wouldn't let him fail, but he wasn't keen on doing school work in a drab and sterile hospital room for the first part of the school year. Plus, he missed his friends.

All of them had come to see him, of course, bringing gifts and smiles of support and reassurance. The shooting team down at the clubhouse sent him a get well card with over fifty signatures and a free lifetime membership which was nice for Jason's father since he was one who paid both of their annual fees. The football team had also sent a card along with the team picture from the year before. There were quotes from all his teammates, saying things like "Stay strong, Blaze! You're the man!" They had also given him a fifty-five dollar gift card to Dick's.

The most comforting support, however, came from his girlfriend, Katie. She would come every other day to see him, and text him and call him all the other days, and she would hug him and give him a kiss on the cheek.

"You look better," she would say every time.

"Glad I look it," he would reply with a warm smile.

Two years—that's how long they'd been together. They'd been friends forever, but it wasn't until sophomore year that he asked her to go see *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. He didn't care for Harry Potter, hadn't even seen the first two films, but knew that it was her favorite book series, her favorite movie series, her favorite post card collection, her favorite everything. She went with him even though she had plans to go with her girlfriends to the midnight showing and it had been just right—none of the first date awkwardness. They had been as they always had been, making sex jokes, talking about sports, and the dramas of their friends. The only difference came after the date, when he dropped her off at her house. Instead of

“Night, Kate!” it was a soft kiss on his lips followed by his arms wrapped around her tiny cheerleader waist. There had been no heartfelt conversation or melodramatic deceleration of feelings. They had simply transitioned from one plateau to another without any of the passionate theatrics.

Now she was telling him that she was reading up on paraplegic therapy and helping his parents install railings in the house for him.

“You don’t have to do that,” he told her. “Don’t you have other things to do? Don’t you want to hang with Lacey and them?”

“I know I don’t have to do it. I want to do it,” she told him, staring into his eyes.

“My parents have mentioned anything about when I’m getting out of here, have they?”

“No, the doctor hasn’t told you when, I guess.”

“Not yet. He keeps saying either a little over or under a month.”

“Well, don’t worry about it. Just rest up.”

He looked down at his legs. “Like I can do anything else.”

She gave him a playful pop on the forehead. “I’ve gotta go pick my sister up. I’ll text you when I get home, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I love you.” She kissed him on his lips and then left. He pulled out the James Patterson book his mother had got him from the store but it wasn’t a very good book, so he put down and started working the Sudoku puzzle he had been solving before Katie showed up.

*

Carl Smith bent his knees and looked out across the fairway. Taking off his golfing cap, he wiped some of the sweat off the side of his face with it. Off in the distance he could see a small yellow flag sticking up. He squinted and tried to remember if this part of the course—hole 14—was the one had a sand trap on each side of the green. Behind him he heard a snicker.

“You sink that from here and you can get a birdie,” Cooper Thomas said from behind the golf car as he rummaged through his club bag.

Smith gripped the wood tightly and performed a third of his swing twice as a warm up before following all the way through and smacking the small white ball with as much force as he could muster. His eyes locked onto the speck of whiteness as it began its slow descent somewhere over the green. He lost sight of the ball right before it landed.

“Did you see where it went?”

Cooper grinned as he approached with his wood in hand. “I think it landed on the right side of the green. Guess you’re gonna need an iron.”

“Damn,” Carl said, picking the upturned salmon-colored tee.

“Your game is too aggressive, Carl. I’ve been telling you this for years.”

He watched as Cooper stuck his tee, which was green, into the ground. Carl smiled. In many ways, Cooper Thomas reminded him of a tortoise. Cooper, who had not only a round shape but also an ancient, weary face, always wore some article of green clothing. Most office days he settled for green socks, but on recreational days he wore a green polo, green cargo pants, or green shoes. Today, he was wearing all three.

Carl had long learned that peculiarities—even those as tacky as his golfing partner’s—only added flavor to a person’s character and made them more memorable. He and his wife, Demetria, had derived much amusement from the tragic farce that formed Cooper’s somewhat limited wardrobe. Sometimes he wondered what people thought his peculiarities were, wondered what they laughed at him about. He knew that the black folks on the other side of town laughed at him—laughed at him all the time, in fact. Except it wasn’t humorous, light-hearted laughter. No, no, they had laughed in his face and called him an “Uncle Tom” and “The white man’s favorite nigger.” And their laughter was cold and vicious, unmatched in its cruelty, unsurpassed in its malice.

Of course, as he told himself over and over, those people didn’t matter. They were just jealous that he had made something of himself, had become a success while they hadn’t amounted to anything—ever. Just a bunch of drunks and ne’er-do-wells who sat around and lived off food stamps and welfare checks as they beat one another, and wallowed around in their own muck like dogs. He had worked, hadn’t he? He was the first man from his family to go to college, first one to have a marriage that lasted more than a decade. So, where did these bastards get off accusing him of being “white” just because he had gotten his life right and they hadn’t? No, no, those envious assholes didn’t matter one bit.

“Carl?”

He looked up to see Cooper stuffing his club back into his bag.

“Where did it land?” Carl asked as they got into the golfcart.

“Sand trap, where else?”

The buggy buzzed past the small green mounds of the course as they sped toward the green. The little windshield did its job and kept the wind out of their eyes and hair, and their hats on top of their heads. Carl picked up his Cheerwine from the can holder and took a sip.

“Demetria wanted me to tell you thank you for the dinner the other night. The pork chops were delicious.”

“Yes, Mary does make some scrumptious chops doesn’t she?”

“Mhm.”

“How is Demetria, anyway?”

“Busy as always. Comes home with new stories from the DMV. Last week, Chet Mitchell—you remember him, Daniel’s grampa? Korean War vet with the bum leg?”

“Yeah, I know Chet.”

“Anyway, he comes in to get his license renewed, and he calmly waits in line behind everyone else, tapping his cane against the floor and eating some of those peanut butter crackers he always carries around with him while he waits. He gets up to the desk and hands the attendant his ID, politely tell her what he needs, and then takes the eye test and flunks it.”

They came to a stop right before the green. Cooper leaned against the steering wheel with his elbow and turned to Carl.

“What do you mean ‘he flunks it?’”

“He’s blind as Samson. The attendant refuses to give him a license without an optometrist’s signature, which he isn’t going to get, so the little old man, little old shriveled up Chet, just loses it. Starts yelling motherfucker this and motherfucker that at the top of his lungs and whipping his cane on the counter until Demetria comes out and takes him to the back office where she calms him down with some decaf coffee and peppermints. Then she calls his daughter, explains the situation to her, and the daughter comes with her husband so that she can take her father back home while hubby drives the car, an old Pontiac GTO, home.”

They got out of the cart and walked to the back where their clubs were.

“Old Chet’s got a streak of crazy in him,” Cooper said as he picked out his putter.

“Guess so. Must run in the family; last year I had to suspend his granddaughter for beating another female student with a lunch tray.”

“A lunch tray?”

“A damn lunch tray, yes sir. Poor girl was bleeding out of her nose and mouth.”

“Damn kids are animals.”

Carl had hit into the trap as well. He stepped down into the pit of sand with his chipper and slapped the ball onto the middle of the green, several inches away from the hole. Cooper’s

ball was already on the far edge of the green, so he was already lining up the shot when Carl got there.

“You ever made par on this hole?” he asked while Cooper practiced the putting motion, determining just the right amount of force with which to hit the ball into the hole.

“Nope, today might be a first.”

Carl pulled up the flag and Cooper tapped the ball but he did it too hard—it went rolling right over it to the other edge of the green.

“Aw, damn,” he said. He went over and hit, more gently this time, sending it sailing into the hole. “Bogey it is.”

Carl tapped the ball in. He grinned, said, “Par.”

“Aw, come on you smug bastard. We still got 3 holes.”

They loaded up, climbed into the cart, and sped off in the direction of Hole 15.

Cooper took a swig of his water bottle and cleared his throat. “I haven’t told anyone yet except Mary, but I think you should know that I’m resigning as superintendent.”

Carl’s face fell at the same time his heart jumped. “I thought you might. I didn’t think you would, but I guess it makes some sense.”

“I’m old. I’ve been doing this job for years and I’m well past retirement time, you know? And I hate to say this but it’s true: people become animals when tragedy strikes. It’s a natural response to fear. Those parents...they’re going to want a sacrifice. They need blood—they want

somebody fired. There ain't any sense in you being that sacrifice. I'm an old fart. When I was nineteen, Charlie leapt out of foxhole and filled my chest with hot lead. There ain't nothing these people can throw at me that can beat that."

He paused thoughtfully as they passed under some elm trees. His face turned red as calm, articulate anger flowed out of his mouth.

"They think that having someone else in either your place or my place will make their children safer, but it won't. They know nothing of the bureaucracies of public education, what hoops the teachers and administration have to jump through, how our poverty redefines the phrase 'shoestring budget.' They'll get interested now, of course. They weren't interested when their children came home with textbooks that were falling apart, or when their kids's grades didn't amount to much. But they'll sure be interested as hell now, I bet. They'll want to do everything, these people, from telling the cafeteria what to cook to teaching the damn classes themselves, just so they have some illusion of control, so that they can have the illogical belief that they can protect their children from all angles, all times of the day."

Carl didn't know what to say, so he just sat there with his eyes fixed on his nearly empty can of Cheerwine. Cooper had always been one of his strongest supporters, assertively pushing for him to be principal and even standing beside him after the Kinski debacle.

"You better be careful here on out, Carl. They're gonna try and take over the damn school, and you better believe they'll have the press behind them as well."

Carl nodded solemnly as they came to a complete stop at the beginning of Hole 15.

"Now, enough of this depressing shit. Let's play some golf."

